

CHAPTER VI

HISTORY, IDEOLOGY AND POPULAR MEMORY

Introduction

Although the visual media's constructions of history rarely meet the standards or share the goals of academic history, they nevertheless "play a significant role in cultural memory and the popular negotiation of the past".¹ A key characteristic of *sinetron kolosal laga* is its association with history or legend and its depiction of heroic tales from the culture's past. Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* takes as its historical setting Java around the time of Sultan Agung's plan to attack Batavia, it does not provide an accurate narrative of those historical events. Historical epics usually simplify and exploit historical events as the background to their story, so as to provide "exoticised spectacle".² While there is plenty of spectacle in this sinetron, it also represents those historical events, together with legendary characters like Nyai Blorong and Nyai Rara Kidul, in such a way as to evoke but also reconstruct popular memories of the history of colonialism and the spread of Islam. Furthermore, its depiction of the heroes' interactions with village people during their travels can often be interpreted as evoking popular memories of the violence of the New Order regime.

Thus the sinetron, it can be argued, engages with current issues in contemporary Indonesian culture and participates in the constant re-writing of the recent and the remote past in relation to the present that all societies undertake. I suggest that this sinetron may function as a form of collective memory because of the interaction among "the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past", the production teams "who selectively adopt and

¹ Steve Anderson, "History TV and Popular Memory," in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 27.

² Mark Jancovich, "Dwight Macdonald and the Historical Epic," in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 91.

manipulate these traditions” and the audiences “who use, ignore, or transform such artefacts according to their own”.³

The chapter begins with an overview of conflict: good versus evil in popular entertainment and how the sinetron takes this good versus evil conflict ideology of popular entertainment but develops this conflict along with the different cultural concepts of good and evil which derive from both traditional Javanese and modernising Islamic cosmologies. Then, I will discuss the way the first two episodes of the series present two key moments in the 16th and 17th Javanese history, 100 years apart. This discussion brings into focus the figure of Mak Lampir and what she, as the dramatic antagonist, signifies in the narrative. I will then discuss the way goddesses and ordinary people and their interactions with the heroes are depicted, and the series’ treatment of authority figures.

Conflict: Good versus Evil

Raney has argued that the heart of drama is the dichotomy of “good-evil, right-wrong, happiness-sadness, staying true to yourself-selling out, exhilaration-safety”.⁴ It is important that audiences can discriminate easily between good and evil in the story and identify which characters represent ‘us’ against ‘them’. Although now there is a tendency to lessen the intensity of the binary good and evil, it actually is transformed into other polarities such as “culture and nature, technocracy and the counterculture, aggression and cooperation” and a further dichotomy which falls into the battle between “the violently ignorant against the enlightenment”.⁵

³ see Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002): 180.

⁴ Arthur Raney, "Expanding Disposition Theory: Reconsidering Character Liking, Moral Evaluations, and Enjoyment " *Communication Theory* 14, no. 4 (2004): 354.

⁵ Dirk Dunbar, "Hollywood's Transformed Hero: A Countercultural Journey," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 6, (2004), <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art6-hollywoodtrans-print.html>.

To some extent *Misteri Gunung Merapi* takes the ideology of good versus evil conflict of popular entertainment. The evil is constructed with some popular evil symbols, such as skulls which are easily identified by the viewers from any level of society. The viewers consequently easily recognise the good, just through distinguishing the enemy of the evil. The audiences then are situated to take side to the good, to give sympathy and to hope the win of the good. This situation is built in every episode, the good win and the audiences feel relief after the tension of the conflict which is sometimes lead to as if the evil would win. However, looking at the personality of the villain in the sinetron, viewers with knowledge of drama theory will consider that construction of evil the sinetron is unusual as it is not totally evil. As there is close relationship between drama and culture, that the construction is not divorced from the culture which produces the drama, exploring the Javanese tradition and contemporary Indonesia will help to understand the unique evil construction.

Van der Kroef, in his study of Indonesian culture, has noted that despite its cultural and social organizational diversity, “the whole structure of these Indonesian societies seems to revolve around this religiously sanctioned confrontation of opposites” such as left and right, female and male, coast or seaside and land or mountainside, below and above, earth and heaven, spiritual and worldly, downwards and upwards, peel and pit, exterior and interior, behind and in front, West and East, younger brother and older brother, new and old. In all of these pairs of opposites, the synthesis or the harmony or the fusion of the two is “the essence of the cosmos” and will “strengthen the community as a whole”.⁶ Right up to today the complementarities of opposites⁷ are still considered as the best union.

⁶ Justus van der Kroef, "Dualism and Symbolic Antithesis in Indonesian Society," *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 5 (1954): 853.

⁷ I have often heard when a marriage works well, people comment that the husband and wife are a pair of *tumbu* and *tutup* (bamboo bowl and lid), because they are different so that they can complement each other. In contrast, when a marriage fails people comment that was because they are not a pair of opposites, for example, both are the first child of the family, or the last child, or born on the same day, etc.

According to Anderson, traditionally in Java, *wayang* was used to educate the young whereby the Javanese would learn about his existential position and his relationship to “the natural and supernatural order, to his fellow-men —and to himself”.⁸ Similar to van der Kroef, Anderson has also noted the complementarity between “the obvious dualities of the Universe” which forms the harmonious tension and energetic stability of the Javanese society. This “*weltanschauung*” in his view is in fundamental opposition to “the cosmologies of Christianity and Islam in which the Supreme Being is quite unambiguous, representing only one set of poles (maleness, goodness, light, and reason)”.⁹ With the dualities of the Javanese universe, good and evil are ambiguous. The morality is not about whether it is good or evil but whether it is appropriate or not. However, Western civilization has influenced this view of a “tolerance of ambiguity” which has “tended to be devalued towards a commonplace morality play between Good and Evil”.¹⁰

As *sinetron* are products of culture, the construction of good and evil in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is culturally specific. There are some influences of traditional performance, and this can be seen in the building of conflict in this *sinetron*. In Javanese *wayang*, conflict is between the Pandawa brothers against the Kurawa, their cousins, in which the Pandawa are constructed as the heroes and the good. However, “the victory of Pandawa over the Kurawa does not mean the triumph of good over evil, for justice and nobility are not exclusive to their side”.¹¹ She has argued that the Pandawa’s slaying of the Kurawa, although it is to regain their kingdom, is categorised as a sin because the Kurawa are their relatives.¹² “The criticism of the Kurawa is not that they are bad men but bad

⁸ Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1996), 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ruth McVey, “The *Wayang* Controversy in Indonesian Communism,” in *Context, Meaning, and Power in Southeast Asia*, ed. Mark Hobart and Robert H. Taylor (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1986), 23.

¹² *Ibid.*

*satrya*¹³” because the Kurawa do not behave as appropriate *satrya*.¹⁴ Anderson gives an example of Adipati Karna: although he stands at the side of the Kurawa, he is considered as a hero and *satrya* because “he lives and dies as *satrya*”.¹⁵ It can be said morality is plural in Javanese culture.

Misteri Gunung Merapi also follows the dichotomy of good-evil and takes some popular symbols which the audience can clearly identify as representing either good or evil. However, a detailed examination of the representation of good and evil in the sinetron shows that good and evil are not black and white, as they are in most popular sinetron. Just as good and evil in Javanese culture are joined one to the other, inseparable like the two sides of a coin, so good and evil in the sinetron are not absolutely separate from one another.

As well as being connected to one another in this specifically Javanese way, good and evil can become associated with a variety of different oppositions at different times. This is part of what it means to say that the sinetron participates in a constant re-writing of the recent and the remote past in relation to the present. In the discussion which follows, I try to identify some of these current oppositions of meaning and value as they appear in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*.

Representing History

Mak Lampir lives on the slopes of Mount Lawu. She has a school, Anggrek Jingga, with many women and men as her pupils. She is a very powerful woman. She has learned martial arts since she was a child, developing her skill

¹³ “The king communicates with the supernatural powers to secure their benevolence; the *brahmana* perform the rituals of state and transmit the culture of the community to the next generation; the *satrya* have the duty of administering the government and protecting the state from external attack; the traders maintain economic prosperity while the artisans construct the material apparatus of the civilization. Out of the concept of function there now emerges the idea of morality. Precisely because all functions are interrelated, and because each order is essential to all others, social approval for individuals within each order depends on how adequately they fulfil their order’s functions”. Anderson, *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese*, 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵ Ibid.

through the help of devils. She praises Bathari Durga (Kali). She builds a large statue of Durga in her cave as an object of worship. To gain new power she often makes human sacrifice: a baby, a boy with special characteristics, or a virgin woman who is about to get married. Her acts create terror in the community. She even spreads her knowledge to her pupils. She teaches them to focus more on purpose and use any means to reach the goal.

Sultan Patah, the king of Demak¹⁶ does not agree with Mak Lampir's acts and school. Her acts which create terror in the people of Demak and her worship of Bathari Durga are in opposition to Islam which is the basic foundation of the Demak community. The *kyai*, as the teachers of Islam, are advisers to Sultan Patah. That is why Demak and all the *kyai* want to kill Mak Lampir. To kill her, Sultan Patah asks advice from Sunan Kudus¹⁷. Sunan Kudus then chooses Kyai Ageng Prayoga to lead the soldiers to fight against Mak Lampir and her pupils. Because Mak Lampir cannot be killed, the only way to keep her from continuing her evil actions is by putting her in a special coffin made from black wood with four gold nails and holy sentence on its sides. Because she is locked in the coffin, she promises to herself that she will take revenge on Kyai Ageng Prayoga. A century later when the coffin is accidentally opened by two villagers, Mak Lampir arises and begins to pursue all Kyai Ageng Prayoga's descendants.

Seen in its historical context, this conflict between Mak Lampir and Sultan Patah, the king of Demak around the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century, could be interpreted as representing the conflict between Hinduism and Islam. Demak is considered to be the first Islamic kingdom or sultanate in Java. The most powerful kingdom before Demak was Majapahit, which took a combination of Hinduism and Buddhism as the religious foundation of everyday life. With the flowering of Demak and the fall of Majapahit by the end of the 15th century, Islam began to spread throughout Java. However, the authority of the

¹⁶ Demak is the first kingdom in Java which takes Islam as the basic foundation in every day life

¹⁷ There are believed to be nine holy sunan who helped Demak spread Islam across Java: Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Sunan Giri, Sunan Bonang, Sunan Ampel, Sunan Kudus, Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Gunung Jati, Sunan Muria, and Sunan Drajat.

Sultanate of Demak was itself eventually replaced by that of the Central Java-based Sultanate of Mataram, which became established and claimed the lineage as the legitimate successor of the grand Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit Empire of the previous century.

There are several versions of the gradual fall of the Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit Empire. Based on the much later *Babad Tanah Jawi*¹⁸ and *Serat*¹⁹ *Kanda*, there is a story that the fall of Majapahit was caused by Demak's attack. In these court chronicles, Sultan Patah of Demak was a Muslim son of the Hindu-Buddhist emperor of Majapahit but, on religious grounds, would not visit him and eventually rebelled against him, defeating Majapahit's soldiers. This dynastically-legitimizing account portrays the violent and rapid victory of Islam over Hinduism. However, there is historical evidence such as surviving inscriptions (*prasasti*) and other Majapahit court writings (such as *Negara Kertagama* and *Pararaton*) suggesting that the spread of Islam in Java happened more peacefully and gradually. In this story, the fall of Majapahit came after its Hindu-Buddhist dynastic line had been re-established by late in the 15th century after having been temporarily replaced by another non-Islamic power or another branch of its royal family but then, after a gradual decaying of its empire with the expansion of Demak and a moving of its court to Kediri, it was finally overthrown around 1527. However, it is now not clear how this happened or who defeated it.²⁰ Moreover, *prasasti* and old cemetery sites show that there had been some Muslim settlement since 1369, thus while Majapahit was still in its glorious era, and there were some Muslims amongst the royal court. This suggests that, at least initially, Islam came into Majapahit peacefully because the Muslim newcomers and converts managed to live harmoniously within the still largely Hindu milieu.²¹

¹⁸ The *Babad Tanah Jawi* (Chronicle of the Land of Java) is a collection of accounts, between history and myth, based on unclear sources but based on dynastically-sponsored accounts praising and legitimising the powers and descent of the rulers of the time.

¹⁹ *Serat* means literary work. In Javanese tradition *serat* are written usually in the form of lyric poems following certain rules to be read by singing them.

²⁰ M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since C.1300*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 36-37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

However, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* chose to present the simpler and more easily dramatisable account of a single violent confrontation and conflict between irreconcilable and hostile systems of belief.

Traditionally, the differences between Islam and Hinduism or other cultural forces were not accompanied by conflict; rather they became syncretised.²² Reading the construction of conflict in the sinetron and comparing with the dominant historical version, there could have been a subversive political subtext in the sinetron's depiction of the struggle. Considering that the Hindu and Islamic traditions could mix harmoniously in Javanese culture, the open conflict between Sultan Patah and Mak Lampir that is portrayed in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* might be better understood in terms of the more recent context of conflict between the New Order and Communism, with Sultan Patah's anxiety about Mak Lampir's ideology being similar to the New Order's anxiety about communist ideology. The Sultan's orders to destroy Mak Lampir's school, to kill her and all of her students to prevent the spread of this ideology, resemble the New Order's threat to communism. The image of open conflict between Sultan Patah and Mak Lampir, especially the way Sultan Patah acted to destroy her school, is part of cultural memory, reminiscent of the way the New Order era has treated its political enemy, the communists.

This suggests that "historical events unfold according to familiar narratives," as Steve Anderson argues about televised histories elsewhere.²³ The image of open conflict can also be understood through other familiar narratives, for example, in the Islamic tradition of the nine saints, the Wali Songo, and the bravery of Muslim defenders and conquerors, against Majapahit and against the Portuguese and Dutch infidels.

²² L. F. Brakel, "Islam and Local Traditions: Syncretic Ideas and Practices," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, no. 9 (2004); 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); George Quinn, "The Tunnels of Java," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2004).

²³ Anderson, "History TV and Popular Memory," 27.

The second episode takes as its background Majapahit's main successor, Mataram in the early seventeenth century, over a century after the rule of Sultan Patah in Demak. The story's conflict is now between Sultan Agung²⁴, the ruler of the empire of Mataram, and Mak Lampir. The Sultan considers her an enemy because she helped the gradual Dutch invasion of Mataram which had started with their capture of the northwest coastal port of Jayakarta, now renamed Batavia, which they were using as their main, fortified, base. He is surprised that she cooperated with the Dutch as he cannot understand how an old witch could make an alliance with modern Dutchmen. However, Sultan Agung has also found that Mak Lampir is very powerful and she is not easy to capture. He meditates to ask his spirit wife, Nyi Rara Kidul to come to his aid. She explains to him that Mak Lampir is special woman who has been interested in studying black magic since she was young girl. Her entire life is dedicated to pursuing and developing this supernatural power and she has become half human and half spirit. She cannot die. To defeat her, Nyi Rara Kidul advises him to find the whip Amal Rasuli. This whip cannot kill her, but it can destroy her power. Sultan Agung then orders Tumenggung Surotani²⁵ to find Amal Rasuli so he can stop Mak Lampir's activities. The Tumenggung visits *Kyai Jabat* to ask for his advice about where he could find the whip, and is told that only *Kyai Ageng Jembar Jumantoro* knows where it is.

Tumenggung Surotani climbs Mount Merapi to meet *Kyai Ageng Jembar Jumantoro*. The *Kyai* gives him the whip but Tumenggung Surotani is not able to hold it. *Kyai Ageng Jembar Jumantoro* tells him that to be able to hold the whip he must do many good deeds and control his passions, advising him to carry out many prayers and recitations so that in his heart he only has one purpose, to fight against evil.

In this second episode, although Mak Lampir is still considered an enemy of the kingdom, the reason to attack her is not because of her different religion, as

²⁴ Sultan Agung ruled Mataram in 1613-46. His main efforts were the spreading of Islam in Java by an acculturation between Javanese culture and Islam, and the attacking of Batavia in 1628-29.

²⁵ Tumenggung Surotani was the leader of the Sultan's soldiers.

it had been in the first episode set a century before. Now the reason for trying to defeat her is more humanist and political. She is dangerous because in order to gain her supernatural power, she sacrifices innocents such as newly weds, newborn babies, or a child with a special sign at its birth. Also, her extraordinary supernatural power is considered to pose a political threat if she opposes Mataram. It is better to attack Mak Lampir while she is still on her own before she can join the Dutch in a war against Mataram.

Dutch activity in Java was firstly for the commercial trading purposes of the Dutch East India Company (VOC, Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie), increasing to political then military activity to support the development of the VOC's business enterprise by establishing a trade monopoly system. This required political control over the various Indonesian kingdoms. The Dutch moves to enforce the monopoly system on traders on the northern coastal area of Central Java, still part of the empire of Mataram, aroused the opposition of Sultan Agung who planned to attack their main base of Batavia. The subsequent eleven year physical clash between Mataram and the Dutch created an economic disaster for Mataram. Its losses of trade from the Dutch-blocked northern coastal cities, added to by the reduction of agricultural activities as manpower was drafted into the war efforts and the mobilisation of agricultural products to support the war had consequences of hunger and poverty, and an increase in criminals and beggars as a result of the increase in lawlessness. The war between Mataram and the Dutch created not only a social and economic crisis but also the disintegration of Mataram's authority as well as a reduction in the area it controlled. The Sultan's failures in attacking Batavia decreased Mataram's power. This political loss motivated Sultan Agung to build the perceived legitimacy of his power by improving culture. One of the cultural aspects developed was the Javanese calendar which is based on the Muslim calendar but combines the solar and lunar systems. He also created and instituted the celebration of Mohammad's birthday with the ceremonial festival of *Garebeg Maulud*²⁶. As he was seen to be

²⁶The *Garebeg Maulud* or *Sekaten* is now one of the cultural attractions in Solo and Yogyakarta. The attractions of this festival include processions of costumed court retainers and guards, floats with coloured mountains of rice, the playing of famous gamelan, and Islamic prayer ceremonies.

supporting the development of Islam in Java, the *kyai* were behind him, supporting his attacks on Batavia.²⁷

In *Misteri Gunung Merapi* the conflict between the *kyai* and Mak Lampir has not only an ideological but also a political perspective. The sinetron did not focus on Sultan Agung's personality and his ideas of how to attack Batavia. Rather it depicts the figures of many common people who help him in this plan. The heroic figures are fictive, such as *Kyai Lembah Manah*, *Ki Bagus Santosa* and *Ki Darma*, whereas in actuality the attack on Batavia was lead by Tumenggung Baurekso, Tumenggung Suro Agul-agul, *Kyai Dipati Madingo* and *Kyai Dipati Upasonto*. In the sinetron, the story focuses on Lindu Aji as a *senopati telik sandi* (undercover commander) who counted the power of the enemy and prepared all the allied forces who supported the attack. Significantly, the roles of *kyai* and *santri* (*pesantren* students) in fighting against Dutch colonization are portrayed strongly in the sinetron. Although there are many popular stories in circulation of the role of *kyai* in fighting for Indonesian independence, their roles were left out in dominant versions of Indonesian history textbooks during the New Order era. Through its explicit portrayal of them, it seems that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is attempting to recover their history of political struggle.

Although the background of the story is the plan of Sultan Agung to attack Batavia, the construction of the Dutch in this sinetron is different from the way they were portrayed in New Order films and sinetron. Although Captain de Vorce, for example, is still portrayed as the colonialist, it is because of his duty to the VOC. But in his relationship to members of his 'native' staff, he is constructed as a friendly and appreciative man. In this case, the sinetron does not follow the New Order's convention of constructing Dutch historical characters as mythically cold and unsympathetic colonialists but rather portrays him as a human being.²⁸ This also suggests that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has modified New Order films'

²⁷ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since C.1300*, 43-7.

²⁸ Budi Irawanto, *Film, Ideologi, Dan Militer: Hegemoni Militer Dalam Sinema Indonesia [Film, Ideology, Military: Military Hegemony in Indonesian Cinema]* Cet. 1. ed. (Yogyakarta: Media Pressindo, 1999), 106.

dominant representation²⁹ of the war between Dutch and Indonesian republic in terms of a narrowly military ideology.

This sinetron also construct fictive figures who prefer to stand on the Dutch side. However, it again breaks with the previous dichotomy between ‘hero’ and ‘traitor’. Unlike the construction of traitors in New Order films as selfish bootlickers to the Dutch, with all possible bad qualities that human beings can have, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* constructs the traitors as also heroic figures who stand on the Dutch side because of respectable reasons such as *hutang budi* (indebtedness and obligation), friendship, and love. It can be said that the construction of both the heroes and the traitors is not based on the conventional New Order myth of colonialism but rather on aspects of their humanity.

Mak Lampir: An Ideological Enemy

In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, the audience is situated to stand against Mak Lampir, in part because of her worship of the statues of Bathara Kala and Bathari Durga. For the traditional Javanese these two spirit goddesses are causes of disorder, while for Muslims, worshipping any statue is a serious sin (see Figures VI-1 and VI-2). This negative characteristic, unacceptable to both traditional Javanese and Muslims, is reinforced in the sinetron by the terror created by Mak Lampir and her pupils.

The audience is obviously led to judge that Mak Lampir is wrong but it does not mean that she is wholly evil because there are also some elements of goodness revealed in her personality (which will be discussed in Chapter 8).

²⁹ Salim Said argued that films were representations of dominant ideology of the time of the production of the films. War films produced during the New Order era were dominated by the physical conflict between the Dutch and the Indonesian republic. In his notion, these films were focussed on the efforts of heroic military groups, to show the importance of the military’s role in Indonesian independence. Ibid..



Figure VI- 1 : Mak Lampir with skulls as a sign of evil



Figure VI- 2 : Mak Lampir and her pupils worshipping statue

In *Misteri Gunung Merapi* conflict between good and evil has ideological dimensions. The identification of ‘good’ is constructed through the presentation of the *kyai*, the Javanese Muslim scholars. They want to kill Mak Lampir because she worships statues, because she gains spiritual power through human sacrifice, because she supports the Dutch colonial power, and because she plans to take revenge by killing all of *Kyai Ageng Prayoga*’s descendants. The conflict between Mak Lampir, who supports Dutch colonization, and the *kyai* reconstructs a cultural memory of the role of *kyai* in fighting against Dutch colonisation, which is almost forgotten in history.

However, the sinetron offers a reasonable explanation of Mak Lampir’s desire for revenge. In the first episode, she is pictured as a victim because her religious beliefs are in opposition to the king’s and she is blamed for spreading these wrong beliefs to her students by continuing to worship Bathara Kala and Bathari Durga. That is, she represents the old gods and pre-Islamic beliefs. She will be defeated, eventually, by history. This opposition is, as we have seen, is established in the sinetron’s first episode and remains a key conflict underlying her antagonism to Sembara.

In Hinduism, Bathari Durga is considered as goddess who possesses a strong energy or power (*sakti*).³⁰ The archaeological data shows that in at least the

³⁰ Hariani Santiko, "The Goddess Durga in the East-Javanese Period," *Asian Folklore Studies* 56, no. 2 (1997): 212.

11th to 13th centuries Durga was “worshipped mainly to gain victory over and protection from enemies”.³¹ However, in the 15th century, the representation of Durga changed into a demonic goddess with “fangs, bulging eyes, large nose, and long, loose, disordered hair (*gimbal*) and has the look of a female demon (*raksasi*)”.³² Brakel, in her 1986 study of the offerings to Durga made by the rulers of Surakarta and Mangkunegaran³³, found that Durga “represents the process of separation of body and soul”. However she has also found that “people may try to use Durga’s negative power to assist them in achieving their frustrated desires, desires that are usually harmful to their fellow men”.³⁴ The offerings are used to satisfy the goddess, to keep her from threatening to cause problems. However, in Mak Lampir’s case, among the problems which put her in the position of the enemy of the kingdom are both her worship of Durga and her offerings, which include human sacrifice.

The first episode stands as the background and explains the reason why Mak Lampir wants to kill Farida and all the descendants of *Kyai* Ageng Prayoga and why she is fought by all *kyai*. The idea of killing all the descendants of *Kyai* Ageng Prayoga can be read as an analogy of the concept of “*bersih lingkungan*”³⁵ (literally: clean up the surroundings) which was applied to families of communists during the New Order era. Just as Mak Lampir believes that all the descendants of *Kyai* Ageng Prayoga should pay for the ‘mistake’ he made during his life, so the

³¹ Ibid.: 216.

³² Ibid.: 221-2.

³³ In the mid-18th century, thus after the period in which *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is set, the empire of Mataram split into four sultanates, two of these based with their courts in Yogyakarta, the other two, Surakarta (or Pakubawana) and Mangkunegaran, in Solo. Since Indonesia became a republic, the power of the sultans of Mangkunegaran and Surakarta have been limited to the preservation of cultural tradition. Politically, they are now powerless. The tradition of offering to Durga in the forms of food is still performed by the ‘rulers’ of Surakarta and Mangkunegaran.

³⁴ Clara Brakel, “Sandhang-Pangan” For the Goddess: Offerings to Sang Hyang Bathari Durga and Nyai Lara Kidul,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 56, no. 2 (1997): 278.

³⁵ *Bersih lingkungan* also refers to the idea of ‘cleansing the public service from the taint of communism’, “even those not involved in the events of 1965-66 have been compelled to demonstrate ideological ‘cleanness’ in accord with the anti-communist national consensus, and also as a condition of their acceptance into education, professions, or public service” Mary S. Zurbuchen, “History, Memory, and The “1965 Incident” In Indonesia,” *Asian Survey* 42, no. 4 (2002): 566. This idea was promoted especially during the 1970s-1980s and was continued into the propaganda of anti-communism in Indonesia.

New Order regime applied the rule of “no rights to speak” to those who were labelled as communists and also their family and relatives. Even a child who was born after 1965, if he or she had a connection with a family or relative who had been involved in the communist movement of 1965, was still considered as “*tidak bersih lingkungan*” (not clean) and to not have the right to speak publicly or to apply to work in the public service. In the sinetron the frantic fear of the descendants of *Kyai Ageng Prayoga* is reminiscent of the terrifying incidents of 1965-1966. There are many stories in circulation about the trauma of the killings of that time, with witnesses describing many human heads and dead body parts floating on the river. “The horror of the killings, for both victims and their families, and communities as a whole, was intensified by the fact that in most cases the violence was perpetrated by fellow citizens, not the state forces”.³⁶ It could be suggested that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* draws on popular memories of that time.

Misteri Gunung Merapi has also built into its narrative many minor conflicts which are, however, represented as polar oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, those who belong and those who are foreign or ‘other’. In presenting the relationship between the state apparatus of law enforcement and the people, for example, the sinetron constructs this apparatus as quite similar to the New Order state apparatus. The plot significantly begins with a violent act apparently evoking this. People are suspicious of Sembara and Basir as strangers in their village. As there is a threat of terror abroad, they decide to catch the two and question them. The process of investigation of Sembara and Basir by the *jagabaya* (security officials) is presented in a way that recalls the way that the police during the New Order era treated culprits. Rather than asking questions, they try to force Sembara and Basir to admit that they intend to spread terror in this village. When Sembara and Basir say that they know nothing, they are beaten them to force them to admit wrongdoing. During the New Order most culprits would make an admission even

³⁶ Barbara Hatley, "Recalling and Representing the 1965/1966 Anti-Communist Violence in Indonesia" (paper presented at the Asia Reconstructed: Proceedings of the 16th Biennial Conference of the ASAA, the University of Wollongong, 2006), <http://coombs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASAA/biennial-conference/2006/proceedings.html>, (accessed 1 December 2006).

although they were innocent, but could not bear any more torture from the officers doing the investigation. Then, when journalists asked them about the truth of the incident they would say that they had unwillingly confessed because this would stop the torture. In contrast, in the sinetron, Sembara and Basir become heroes because they consistently say that they know nothing of the terror. They even criticise the way the *jagabaya* treat them, protesting that they consider it as unfair. By implication this is a criticism of the security apparatus of the New Order.

The *rakyat* (ordinary people) in the sinetron are constructed as easily manipulated by gossip. Rumour can persuade them to attack the innocent without trying to search for the truth. The rumour that Sembara is a *manusia harimau* (tiger spirit) spread by Rosminah leads the people to attack Sembara without any further enquiry. In this case the sinetron is constructing ordinary people as traditional and communal. They act because someone whom they regard as a respected person in authority, like Rosminah, asks them to do something. They blindly accept everything she says because of her position in their local society.

The New Order era was strongly identified with the ideology of 'development'. This concept of development refers not only to mental but also to physical development, such as the construction of tall buildings and roads. However, very often the interests of ordinary people were sacrificed to pay for this development. They had to sell their land at a cheap price to the developers because it was required for a new modern building or road. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents similar incidents as a problem for conflict development and at the same time implicitly criticise the corrupt ruler. The sinetron presents members of the *rakyat* demonstrating to the corrupt ruler to stop the building of a road at the expense of their interests. A group of men and women walk together to the *kedemangan* (area where customary law, *adat*, is decided) to state their disagreement (see Figure VI-3). Because their demonstration fails to change the decision of the *demang* (village headman), Sembara first reminds him that his action is not correct, and then, because the *demang* does not listen to this advice, attacks the *demang*'s spirit followers and helpers. When these have been defeated, the *demang* becomes helpless and the road building is stopped.



Figure VI- 3 : Ordinary people holding a demonstration against the building of a new road on their land

Looking at the various conflicts developed either in the main plot or sub-plots of every episode in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, it can be said that the sinetron constructs conflicts in which the viewers can easily identify who represents ‘us’ against the ‘other’. With this construction, the sinetron is enjoyable for any level of age and education background. But it also has an ideological function in encouraging people to see such protests as possibly effective – and perhaps to look for leaders like Sembara who, I will suggest in the next chapter, signifies the Javanese dream of a culture hero who brings about change in a chaotic situation of economic crisis and endless conflict among social groups.

History and Popular Memory

Misteri Gunung Merapi has been criticized for its lack of cultural authenticity. Yet it does not claim to represent traditional Javanese culture. Legend and history are only for background, exploited in order to add appeal, rather than with the aim of presenting the authentic history and legend. In various ways it functions as a kind of nostalgic cultural memory of the past, for those who are generally familiar with traditional narratives and legend, which evoke a time when agrarian values were still strong and relationships between humans and

nature were still in balance. As we have seen, too, it is also nostalgic for audiences who are familiar with the conventions and styles of martial art stories.

Taking as its setting Central Java in the seventeenth century, the story focuses on the plan of Sultan Agung, ruler of Mataram to attack Batavia and repel Dutch colonization. This story is well-known as it is part of the history lessons that elementary students had to learn during the New Order era. The politics of divide and rule which caused Indonesians to lose their fights against Dutch colonization is also emphasised in this. Moreover, the sinetron's story line is enriched with legendary elements such as the marriage between Sultan Agung and the spirit Queen of the South Sea, Nyai Rara Kidul, and Javanese popular narratives such as that of Nyai Blorong and *golek pesugihan*³⁷. With this combination of history and legend, both the younger people who get the story from history lessons at school and the older people who are familiar with the legendary stories can easily identify with the narrative.

Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* refers to the historical episode of Sultan Agung's plan to attack Batavia, the main theme of the earlier episodes of the sinetron is the love story between Sembara and Farida. This makes *Misteri Gunung Merapi* different from other sinetron which take legend and history as the main theme. Most of those which also take historical episodes as their main theme, such as the sinetron *Kaca Benggala* (Wise Mirror) and *Mahapatih Gajah Mada* develop the conflicts that arise from succession feuds, with many and various intrigues and a desire for power,³⁸ as central elements which are not available in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. Instead, this sinetron foregrounds the role of ordinary people: the major category of heroes is not aristocrats but *kyai*; and the role of ordinary village people is given prominence. In doing this there is an

³⁷ As mentioned later, '*golek pesugihan*' means getting wealth from making a pact with a devil spirit. Nyi Blorong, the mermaid or snake queen is popular due to her extraordinary power to make people rich.

³⁸ Ahmadun Yosi Herfanda, "Kaca Benggala [Mirror of Life]" *Republika Online*, 27 Februari 2005 2005, http://www.republika.co.id/koran_detail.asp?id=189104&kat_id=103&kat_id1=&kat_id2=, (accessed 24 Maret 2006).

evocation of older Javanese democratic traditions of public discussion and decision-making.³⁹

The Javanese Muslim element in the sinetron is in the presentation of the interrelated *kyai*⁴⁰, *santri*, and *pesantren*. The representation of *kyai* in this sinetron is not only as a Muslim scholar and the head of an Islamic boarding school, a *pesantren*, teaching Islam to the students in the *pesantren*. Rather he performs the role attributed to him in the past in popular oral narratives, as a powerful figure who masters both the seen and the unseen worlds. Indeed, although there are some depictions of a *kyai* teaching his *santri* in his *pesantren* (see Figures VI-4 and VI-5), but it is only as background.

In the Colonial era a *kyai* was considered as both a powerful sacred hero and an influential secular personage who faced the Dutch authorities on behalf of the ignorant farmers. In *Misteri Gunung Merapi* there are several portrayals of phenomena which reflect the significance of *kyai* for the people. They come to *kyai* for advice when they have problems such as sickness, marriage problems, or disasters. When Mardian is sick (in Episode 3) his parent asks a *kyai* to visit and examine him. *Kyai* are reflected also as the enemy of Dutch colonialism. Although *kyai*'s participation in war against Dutch colonialism is not clearly reflected in the story, they are presented as supporting the Sultan's plan to attack the Dutch in Batavia.

Unlike Mak Lampir's pupils, the *pesantren* students pictured in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* are male only, since the setting of the story is in the seventeenth century when it was still uncommon for females to attend schools such as *pesantren*. In actuality, female *pesantren* have been instituted only since the 1930s. Although the sinetron does not present any picture of female *pesantren*, it

³⁹ One of the differences between martial art stories written by S.H. Mintardja and Kho Ping Ho, I recall, is in its representation of Javanese village as democratic society.

⁴⁰ In contemporary Javanese context, the word *kyai* can refer to Muslim scholar or paranormal, spiritualist or powerful, and to such as weapons such as *keris* (*kyai* Sangkelat) or pike (*tombak Kyai Pleret*), a set of gamelan (*Kyai Guntur Madu*), or Kasunanan court ship (*Kyai Raja Mala*).

shows the possibility of a girl having private lessons from certain *kyai*. Pitaloka, for example, is presented as a private student of a *kyai* in West Java.

In *pesantren* the students learn how to read and write Qur'an and apply it as a way of life. The students stay there until they finish their study. The *kyai* is considered as their parent whom they should respect and obey. They learn martial arts for sport and self-defence. After finishing their study, they are supposed to apply all they have learned to help each other and spread goodness among the people. That is also the way the sinetron constructs *kyai*, *santri* and *pesantren*.

Kyai are constructed as heroic figures with supernatural power to fight against paganism in traditional Java and as traditional respected figures with spiritual power. Through its presentation, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has reconstructed the *kyai* in memory as a figure with traditional power and authority, which is now tending to disappear in contemporary Indonesia.



Figure VI- 4 : Kyai and Santri



Figure VI- 5 : Meditating Kyai

Typical of the Javanese village is its communalism, with a wide variety of social organizations, including religious study groups and neighbourhood associations. People, both male and female, are generally willing and eager to engage in collective and civic activities. Traditionally Javanese village life was a democratic society. People often used to gather in the *balai desa* (village meeting hall) to talk about various activities and issues in their village. In his novel *Naga Sasra and Sabuk Inten*, S H Mintardja described how important the *rembug desa* (village meeting) was in the past, although he did not mention women's

participation in them, except in preparing food for the meeting. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents as cultural memory *rembug desa* as a medium to solve the village's problems. People come to the *balai desa* and discuss their problems democratically and suggest ideas to solve these problems. The sinetron also constructs the Javanese as friendly people who welcome any foreigners in their village to help solve the village's problems (unless they have been misled by their local leaders), quite similar to Mintardja's construction of the traditional Javanese in his novel. However, unlike Mintardja's novel, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents women's involvement in village public meetings, although only in small numbers. Although they are still not presented as the ones who make suggestions, at least they are involved and their voices are heard.



Figure VI-6 : Village meeting

Conclusion

The construction of the good and the evil is ambiguous in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, however the difference between the good and the evil is still easily recognised by the viewers through the choice of popular symbols. Good versus evil are constructed along with order versus disorder so that the intensity of this binary lessens and the evil is also identified through recognising the person who is responsible for the disorder. Through this way, the sinetron constructs the

ideology of good versus evil along with the Javanese and modern Islamic cosmologies.

Looking at the construction of conflict and narrative in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, it appears that the sinetron tends to speak to popular beliefs and popular sympathies in trying to provide an engaging and satisfying cultural recovery of their ancestors' efforts, failures and losses during the period of early Dutch colonization. Rather than presenting an accurate history of defeats and decline of the empire of Sultan Agung, the sinetron constructs characterizations of the powerful Javanese figures who betrayed their people for their own ambitions. However, rather than presenting wealth as the cause of their betrayal, the sinetron prefers to present *balas budi* (reciprocal obligation) as the reason. In this way, it still justifies the position of the person with high status in the society.

While under the New Order in Indonesia, a popular cultural product like this would have been shaped by the state and its policies, now there are various ideological forces involved in its constructions of history and its appeals to popular memory. Taking advantage of the new openness, this sinetron in particular present a revision of New Order version of colonial history and modified representation of *kyai* as important figures in social, cultural and religious life. Also, as will be discussed extensively in later chapters, the sinetron brings forth the role of women. I suggest that in such a context, this sinetron succeeds by reconfiguring a hybrid construction of Javanese culture with Islamic values.