

# COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF JAVANESE ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE INDONESIAN TELEVISION SERIAL “MISTERI GUNUNG MERAPI”

## Introduction

Among Indonesian television programs, *sinetron* is considered as the favourite entertainment program and its popularity is greater than any other program. *Sinetron*, an acronym of electronic cinematography, is actually a television film series which may be broadcasted every day or every week. It can also mean telefilms on videotape because the medium for recording this film is on electronic tape rather than on celluloid tape (Wardhana 1997, p. 76).

One of the most popular *sinetron*, and it has been produced and broadcasted since 1998 up to now, is *Misteri Gunung Merapi (Mystery of Mount Merapi)*. In the first two years of its broadcasting, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* achieved the top rating, according to AC Nielsen surveys, and until today it is still in the range of the top position. Categorized as a colossal action *sinetron (sinetron kolosal laga)* - it is ‘action’ because fighting is dominant and it is ‘colossal’ because it has a very large cast of characters - this *sinetron* has appealed to audiences because of its visual and action effects and the combination of love, power, and physical fighting (‘Sinetron kolosal laga dari bumi sendiri’ 2003). *Misteri Gunung Merapi* basically tells the story of an evil and powerful witch, Mak Lampir, who tries to spread evil among human beings, in this her efforts are opposed by Sembara, a sacred hero. Although it presents a historical setting in the Mataram kingdom in Central Java under the rule of Sultan

Agung, this *sinetron* is not an accurate representation of that history, instead it is fiction and almost all characters in that story are fictive.

Glancing back at the huge popularity of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, a question immediately arises: why was a *sinetron* with a setting of Java in the seventeenth century able to attract such large and diverse audiences? The two-digit Nielsen rating suggests that the audiences everywhere in Indonesia, in spite of their ethnic background and whether they are from rural or urban areas, prefer to watch this program rather than any other program, either local or imported. As the largest audience, according to AC Nielsen, is from urban areas, the popularity becomes interesting phenomenon because the setting of this *sinetron* is Java in the seventeenth century with the nuances of rural traditional Javanese culture.

This paper focuses on the construction of Javanese identity in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. The serious question which surfaces is how Javanese is communicated as part of national culture to multi-ethnic Indonesian audiences. As an artefact which is formulated in “various social and historical contexts”, national culture – and indeed ‘Javanese culture’ in this *sinetron* - is “continually imagined, invented, contested, and transformed by the agencies of individual persons, the state, and the global flows of commodities” (Foster 1991, p. 252). While under the New Order in Indonesia, a popular cultural product like this would have been shaped by the state and its policies, now commercialisation and globalisation - the global popular culture which concentrates on spectacle and sensation to attract its audiences - plays the dominant role in popular culture production. I want to argue that in such a context, this *sinetron* succeeds by reconfiguring a hybrid construction of Javanese culture with Islamic and some modern values.

## Collective Memory and Construction of Javanese Ethnic Identity

Taking setting of Central Java in the seventeenth century, the story focuses on the plan of Sultan Agung, king of Mataram to attack Batavia and resist Dutch colonialization. This story is popular as it is part of history lessons of the Indonesian resistance toward Dutch colonialization that elementary students must learn during the New Order era. The story is enriched with legendary elements such as the marriage between Sultan Agung and the spirit queen of South Sea, Nyi Rara Kidul and Javanese popular narrative of Nyi Blorong and *golek pesugihan*<sup>1</sup>. With this combination, both the younger people who get the story from history lessons at school and the older people, especially the Javanese who are familiar with the story legend and the popular narrative can easily identify with the story. Since martial art is dominant, it is also nostalgic for audiences who are familiar with the conventions and style of martial art stories. It can also be interpreted that this *sinetron* functions as a 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 manipulate these traditions” and the audiences “who use, ignore, or transform such artefacts according to their own” (Kansteiner 2002, p. 25).

This *sinetron* has been criticized for its lack of cultural authenticity. Yet, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not carry a burden of Javanese cultural representation. Legend and history is only for background, exploited in order to add appeal, rather than with the aim of presenting the authentic history and legend. In some way it functions as a kind of cultural memory of the past, for those who are generally familiar with traditional narratives and legend, when agrarian values were still strong and relationships between humans and nature were still in balance.

---

<sup>1</sup> Golek pesugihan means getting wealth from making a pact with devil spirit. Nyi Blorong, mermaid or the snake queen is popular with her extraordinary power to make people rich.

As the setting is Java in the past, a cursory look at the *sinetron* gives an impression of Javanese traditional performance in Indonesian language. Certainly, around the periods of 2000s there have been a proliferation of *sinetron* with fantasy and historical themes and some of them have recalled to the genre and theme of traditional performance (see Nilan 2000, p. 142-47). As Hatley noted, beginning in the 1990s there has been born a modern version of *kethoprak* (Central Javanese theatre) popular as *kethoprak plesedan*, as “a subversively humorous style of show”. Although it is still performed on stage, “all aspects of performance”, including language “could be subverted and overturned”(Hatley 2004, p. 78-9). While, this *sinetron* still takes the element of *kethoprak* and it is not performed on stage rather it takes the open air as the setting. Yet, there are some elements of Javanese traditional theatre in building the story. *Malih*, for example, is popular in either *wayang wong* (classical dance drama) and *wayang kulit* (puppet shadow show). As Parnickel noted that *malih* or *alihan* (the noun of *malih*) “refers to the capacity of one character to take on the appearance, manner, and voice of another, often entirely different sort of figure” and “*malih* should not be confused with the phenomenon of incarnation” (cited in Keeler 1987, p. 207) . These elements are repeatedly used in this *sinetron*. With her supernatural power, Mak Lampir takes the appearance of Nyi Blorong in order to seduce Kala Gondhang. In another episode, Nyi Blorong can change her form into a village girl to lure Sembara. *Malih* is not only popular in Javanese traditional entertainment but also in Javanese popular narrative as there are many oral folk stories with the theme of *malih*.

Although *sinetron Misteri Gunung Merapi* takes the historical episode of Sultan Agung’s plan to attack *Batavia*, the main theme of the earlier episodes of this *sinetron* is the love story between Sembara and Farida. This makes *Misteri Gunung*

*Merapi* different from other *sinetrons* which take legend and history as the main theme. Most *sinetron*, such the *sinetron Kaca Benggala* dan *Mahapatih Gajah Mada*, which take historical episodes as their main theme develop the conflict on the succession feud with a lot of intrigues and passion of power (Herfanda 2005), central elements which are unavailable in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. The mixing themes taken from different genre in this *sinetron* shows the authenticity is not the main interest. History is interpreted, commodified, and aestheticized in contemporary frames for commercial purpose.

The title of this *sinetron* is *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, nevertheless, this *sinetron* does not develop its genre from most Indonesian mystery, popular in around 1980s. Most Indonesian mystery films take a story of the rise of the dead body to take revenge. This theme is taken from Javanese popular belief of *roh gentayangan*<sup>2</sup> (the unpeaceful rest of the soul). The motivation of zombie is as a tomb agency and a God's messenger, to take revenge and to uphold justice. The ghostly zombie can transform into beautiful human to trap her victims: the rapist, the killer, the corruptor, or the robber. She looks terrifying only in front of the victims. In the end of the story, the soul trapped into the dead body is released with the help of *kyai* (Muslim scholar) and his praying. In contrast, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not employ the plot of the mystery genre. Although one episode of this *sinetron* takes a story of the rise of dead body, it is not for the same purpose (to take revenge). Rather it is about the story of a man who cannot accept his wife's death and tries to resurrect her with the help of Mak Lampir and the evil spirit. Mak Lampir in this episode is a mediator between human and spirit world. This episode shows how the Islamic concept of zombie or dead body is different from the Javanese belief of the soul trapped in the death body. In other

---

<sup>2</sup> There is popular belief circulated among the Javanese of unnatural death, such as being killed, that their soul will not rest peacefully. The unrest soul will try to get the fair justice until a *kyai* helps to release their soul.

words, although this *sinetron* still takes the belief of the existence of the spirit world, it does not communicate in Javanese concept rather this *sinetron* gives to its audiences the Islamic concept of the unseen world.

Language, as Teo has argued, is considered one of the manifestations of identity (Teo 2000a, p. 4). With Indonesian language as the medium for communication, this *sinetron* shows the construction of Indonesian identity or national identity, despite using Javanese past culture as collective memory. Even, Javanese language is rarely used in this *sinetron*. With the Indonesian language as the dominant medium, this *sinetron* could communicate easily the Javanese culture to its national audiences.

Clothing signifies cultural identity. Every ethnic group in Indonesia has its own distinctive clothing. Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* takes a historical Javanese setting, it does not employ Javanese costume in its depiction of the central characters. The costume of *kyai* wears and also some *santri* (*kyai* students) are Arabic. Although the figurants wear Javanese traditional clothes of *jarik* and *kemben*<sup>3</sup>, their role is not central in the story except only as background. The costume of Farida, looking at her hairstyle, is more Balinese rather than Javanese, while the costume of Sembara and most male characters, looking at the colour and pattern of the *blangkon*, headscarf and their *jarik* is *Jawa pasisiran*, Northern coastal Javanese. Central Javanese colour of *jarik* and headscarf is only dark brown and light brown for Surakarta and dark brown and white for Jogjakarta with special pattern, while *Jawa Pasisiran* is more colourful and rich in pattern. The hero's shirt is like kimono's style but showing off his bare upper arms. This shirt style is used to be worn by the clowns in traditional

---

<sup>3</sup> Jarik and *kemben* are traditional costume Javanese people. Jarik is a piece of loose cloth with special motif for covering the lower part of the body and *kemben* is to cover the upper part of the body. Jarik and *kemben* is female costume of lower class society while for the aristocrats, they wear *jarik* and *kebaya*, a special model of cloth with long sleeves.

entertainment. For other female characters, there are elements of Chinese kung fu, especially in hairstyle, combined with modern Javanese. This makes the identity in this *sinetron* fluid, open much identification. This also shows the aspect of borrowing from *kungfu* cinema, as *kungfu* TV series, especially *Return of the Condor Heroes* and *Journey to the West* were popular in Indonesia.

Names in Indonesia also characterise ethnic identity. Considering the setting of Java in the seventeenth century, the name of the characters should be Javanese. However, the names in this *sinetron* include Javanese, Melayu, Sundanese, and modern Indonesian names. As the writer of the story is Asmadi Syafar, a Sumatranese, the central characters appearing in this story have Minang names such as Sembara, Farida, Basir, Mardian, Rosminah, Datuk Larang Tapa and Mak Lampir. The Javanese names are present in the legendary and historical figures such as Sultan Agung, Sunan Kalijaga, Nyi Rara Kidul, and Nyi Blorong. As there are some Dutch figures in this *sinetron*, Dutch names also are also visible such as Karen and de Voss. Other names such as Pitaloka and Mayang Sari are popular for modern Indonesian girl name. It can be said there is an impression of diversity in the choice of the names of the characters.

As action-adventure genre has been popular in Indonesia for a long time and has been broadcasted in television as prime time program, this *sinetron* has made some adaptation of this genre for the local audiences. The characteristic of Western action hero, according to Tasker, is in the representation of “spectacular bodies” in which she devises the term “musculinity”<sup>4</sup>. She argued that the images of the muscular body in action are central to fight-films. “The feats of near-naked action heroes” showing his muscular body is in the camera in both the motion and pose

---

<sup>4</sup> “Musculinity indicates the extent to which physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body representation” Tasker, Y 1993, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*, Routledge, London ; New York.

position in which it offers the body to-be-looked-at. (Tasker 1993, p. 77) As there is different tradition of fighting in the East and West, there is no articulation of masculine strength and power through “hard body” conflict like most depiction of Western action cinema. Javanese hero is characterised by his ability to “master supernatural power” (see Brakel-Papenhuyzen 2006, p.79). Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not offer “the feats of near-naked action heroes”, the costume of the heroes shows the health, fitness, and bodybuilding of the actors. However, this *sinetron* does not present impressive fighting movement like in *kungfu*. *Kungfu* exhibits both muscular body and spectacular movement, however, the focus is in “the apparent willpower and virtuosity movement” (Anderson 1998). Combat in this *sinetron* is more about supernatural powers which make the Javanese tradition of martial art not elaborately displayed. The beautiful movement of attack and counter-attack as the characteristic of martial art are rarely displayed in this *sinetron*, rather a lot of screenings of explosion, which is not generated by a gun, but by an empty hand, shows the exercise of supernatural power. The similarity between this *sinetron* and *kungfu* cinema is in the ability of the fighters in controlling gravity so that it looks like they can fly and fight in the air.

As Indonesia has its own tradition of martial art, this *sinetron* employs a more Javanese tradition of martial art in values and philosophy for developing the story. Sembara and Basir could be categorised as the heroes or the warriors in Western tradition rather than the knight-errant in *kungfu* or *wuxia* stories. In *wuxia* fiction, the Chinese knight errant holds Confucian values<sup>5</sup> in fighting for justice while Sembara

---

<sup>5</sup> There are eight common qualities of the xia, the Chinese knight-errant: “altruism, justice, individualism, loyalty, courage, truthfulness, disregard for wealth and desire for glory”. These values are characteristics of Confucian gentlemen except for individualism.. the xia’s “sense of justice was subjective, and more often than not was in fact vengeance”...”noble xia personified chivalry, and even villainous xia would extend chivalry to those they deemed capable of appreciating the notion of

and Basir, although their values are almost the same, take Javanese and Islam as their ideology and code of conduct. Fighting against evil is the essence of the heroes' ideology and code of conduct in this *sinetron*. This makes the heroes in this *sinetron* more like the hero in Western tradition because it is easy to differentiate between good and evil. Although both hero in the Asian cinema and in the *sinetron* “qualifies supernatural ability”, unlike in Chinese definition, the “essence of heroism” in Javanese and Islam is not “the drama of mortal men who fight and die for a worthwhile cause, attaining epiphany in death”(Teo 2000b). Although Sembara is mortal, he holds a weapon which makes him undefeated by the evil and he is protected by many *kyai*, who always know when he is in trouble. He is a representation as a good Muslim that spreads goodness among the people and sacrifice himself to help the others. With his goodness, God always protects him from any danger, it is strong belief circulated among Muslims.

Unlike Western action tradition of hero who is able to control his suffering, hero in this *sinetron* is more a mythic figure that lives in Javanese dream and imagination. It can be said there is an interaction between Javanese and Islamic elements in the representation of hero. Sembara does not experience any human problem such as sickness and pain. Meditation and recitation of prayer keep him from any danger as if that he has the sixth sense. If he experiences a difficulty it is because there is strong supernatural power, which makes him lose his sense.

Sembara, in his adventure to find Farida and to free them from Mak Lampir's hand, has found a chaotic situation in many villages he has passed through, in which he needs to stay and help the community to solve the mysterious problem. Unlike in the Wild West, the problem in this *sinetron* is not caused by the outlaw, rather it is

---

honor”. Yin, E 2001, 'Introduction to wuxia genre', Heroic Cinema: a guide to Asian movies in Australia viewed 3 March 2006, <<http://www.heroic-cinema.com/eric/xia.html>>

considered as mysterious problem caused by cooperation between evil human and spirit. The fighting in this *sinetron* is not between hero and outlaw rather it is between good human and bad spirits. Sembara does not kill the man who creates a disaster; he even does not punish him, rather the man runs away because he is more afraid being punished by the society. Nevertheless, Sembara punishes the evil spirits and sends them away. With the interaction between Javanese and Islam, it is not surprising that the *sinetron* is popular among any other ethnic background in Indonesia.

## **Conclusion**

The success of this *sinetron* is due to the way the *sinetron* improvises and make use of cultural resources outside the authentic tradition. Although the setting is Javanese in the seventeenth century, the *sinetron* has constructed Javanese identity in response to modern and global values and forms of entertainment and in this way this *sinetron* succeeds in communicating to its national audiences. Javanese culture is limited to the commodification of the legendary elements and the supernatural powers. We can trace the evidence of modern values in the way the *sinetron* gives the theme of romantic love, and of global entertainment in the way it has adapted some elements of Western cinema of action-adventure and *kungfu* or *wuxia*. This *sinetron* also shows the effort to respond to the diversity of cultural or ethnic identity in Indonesia through the use of Indonesian as the national language as media of communication and through applying Islamic ideology which is the dominant faith in Indonesia. Through the choice of names, dance, costume, and place names which are not specifically Javanese, the Javanese past is reconstructed “within its contemporary frame of reference” (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, p.130). As Browitt has argued in relation to Latin America, “we should not regard indigenous cultural identity as

entirely tradition-bound and static, since it is also involved in a constant process of re-evaluation and negotiation and not a static given” (Browitt).

## References

- Anderson, A 1998, 'Kinesthesia in martial art films', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, vol. 42, no. 1-11, viewed 21 June 2006, <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC42folder/anderson2/text.html>>
- Assmann, J & Czaplicka, J 1995, Collective memory and cultural identity. *New German Critique*, vol. 65, no. pp. 125-33, viewed 11 August 2006, <<http://www.jstor.org/search/>>
- Brakel-Papenhuyzen, C 2006, Jaka Tarub, a Javanese culture hero? *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 34, no. 98, pp. 75-90, viewed 10 August 2006, <<http://www.informit.com.au/>>
- Browitt, J 'Nationalising the popular: ritual, resistance and survival in Latin American Popular Culture', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, viewed 8 August 2006, <<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/history/jilas/articles/browitt.pdf>>
- Foster, RJ 1991, Making national cultures in the global ecumene. *Annual Reviews Anthropology*, vol. 20, no. pp. 235-60, viewed <<http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/search/advanced>>
- Hatley, B 2004, Global influence, national politics and local identity in Central Javanese theatre. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 63-99, viewed 26 March 2006, <<http://search.informit.com.au/search;res=apaf>>
- Herfanda, AY 2005, 'Kaca Bengala', *Republika Online*, Minggu, 27 Februari 2005, viewed 24 Maret 2006, <[http://www.republika.co.id/koran\\_detail.asp?id=189104&kat\\_id=103&kat\\_id1=&kat\\_id2=](http://www.republika.co.id/koran_detail.asp?id=189104&kat_id=103&kat_id1=&kat_id2=)>
- Kansteiner, W 2002, Finding meaning in memory: a methodological critique of collective memory studies. *History and Theory*, vol. 41, no. pp. 179-97, viewed 8 August 2006, <<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/>>
- Keeler, W 1987, *Javanese shadow plays, Javanese selves* Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Nilan, P 2000, Representing culture and politics (or is it just entertainment?). Watching Indonesian TV in Bali. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 119-54, viewed 18 August 2006, <<http://search.informit.com.au/search;res=apaf>>

'Sinetron kolosal laga dari bumi sendiri', 2003, *Kompas Online*, 12 October 2003, viewed 13 October 2004, <<http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0310/12/hiburan/619696.htm>>

Tasker, Y 1993, *Spectacular bodies : gender, genre, and the action cinema*, Routledge, London ; New York.

Teo, S 2000a, 'Local and global identity: whither Hong Kong cinema?' *Senses of Cinema*, vol. no. 7, viewed 19 April 2000, <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/7/hongkong.html>>

Teo, S 2000b, 'Love and swords: the dialectics of martial arts romance', *Senses of Cinema*, vol. no. 11, viewed 25 May 2006, <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/11/crouching.html>>

Wardhana, VS 1997, *Kapitalisme televisi dan strategi budaya massa*, Pustaka Pelajar, Yogyakarta.

Yin, E 2001, 'Introduction to wuxia genre', *Heroic Cinema: a guide to Asian movies in Australia* viewed 3 March 2006, <<http://www.heroic-cinema.com/eric/xia.html>>