CULTURAL MATERIALISM OF GHOST: DEBUNKING THE PREVALENCE OF WOMEN GHOST IN INDONESIA

Lalu Ary Kurniawan Hardi[1]*

[1]Magister International Politics and Diplomacy, Faculty of Political Science and Security Studies, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, Poland

*Corresponding author: laluarykurniawanhardi@gmail.com

Abstract *The abundance of folklore, myth, and urban legends in Indonesia that put its central attention to the vengeful character of "female ghost", delineates clear cultural portrayal about the broad scope of violence that happen to Indonesian women. Avery Gordon (2008) conceptualize ghost as the figurative depiction of inarticulate occurrence and haunting reminder about the repression and injustice that exist in our complex social relations. Concurrently, Cheryl Lawther (2021) suggests that haunting is an animated stages inflicted by the unresolved social violence and oppression. In regards to these notions, this article aimed to: (a) examine the socio-economic impetus that drives the over-mystification towards women in Indonesia, and; (b) determine the factors that perpetuate the haunting narratives throughout the generations. As the demystification attempt to rationalize the answer of these questions, this article will operationalize Marvin Harris's cultural materialism theory as its main framework. This article argues that the rich narratives about female ghosts in Indonesia are mainly inflicted by the failure of agrarian economy to provide a decent living condition for women. This phenomenon forced women to step outside the traditional gender roles which led to the massification of violence and oppression. These problems remained until present times, which then contributed to the perpetuation of several ghost stories and haunting narratives that reflects the recurring injustice and oppressions towards women. It is concluded that these narratives serve as: (1) reminder about the recurring oppression; (2) exigent call for reconciliation; (3) pre-emptive narratives for deterrent, and; (4) lesson learned for future improvement.*

1. Introduction

The depiction of women as a monstrous and vengeful demonic entity in folklores, urban legends, and movies seemed to be a prevalent narrative that we could find in various cultures around the world – including Indonesia. A very recent study from Annisa and Adiprasetio (2022) indicates that the visualization of women as ghosts and demonic spirits have undergone a significant increase for the past five decades. The study furtherly illustrates that throughout 1970-2019, there are approximately 338 nationally-produced movies that adopted various folklores and urban legends which delineate women as either a demonic entity, vengeful spirit, and/or simply a ghost (Annisa *et al.*, 2022). Whereas, during the same period, there are only 135 movies that envisage man as the said characters, and 86 movies which feature both genders (Annisa *et al.*, 2022). Apart from the flagrant overrepresentation, question arise when the very same study also suggests that there are 353 movies in which the main protagonist is performed by woman (Annisa *et al.*, 2022). Having this anomaly in mind, the main question that we should address henceforth is, "what is the impetus that drives the pervasive framing towards women as vengeful character?"

In regards to this matter, anthropology provides us a broad spectrum of theoretical and conceptual approach to comprehend the metaphor of haunting in a more constructive way. Subsequently, narrative of haunting could be seen as efficacious anthropological evidence to reconstruct the disregarded excess from the past that remained hitherto (Hollan, 2020). Therefore, if we would like to be pragmatically reductive about this problem, we could simply say that the exorbitant stereotyping about women as vengeful demonic spirit is mainly driven by the unresolved past and affliction, that eventually perpetuates the presence of several haunting narratives. However, such superficial premises obviously will not adequate to capture the whole meaning of the narratives. Therefore, using cultural materialism as a theoretical framework, this article will not only aim to demystify the main stereotyping narrative, but also specify each layer that substantiate the establishment of such metaphor.

2. Methods

In general, this article is written using a descriptive qualitative method, which is a scientific research technique that aims to understand a symptom or social circumstance by collecting data through substantive questions and scientific analysis of related social research subjects (Cresswell 2008; Raco 2010: 7). The method of collecting data utilized in the writing of this article is a study of the literature or literature research. Literature study is a data collection method that examines various written sources for confirmation or validation, such as books, journal articles, online news, and government documents (Zed, 2014). Library research entails collecting information and data from library materials, comprehending, and preserving it, and analyzing it in the context of scientific research (Zed 2014). On the other hand, content-substantive analysis is the data analysis method utilized in this study. This method is one of the qualitative analysis methods widely employed in social research. (Harrison, 2007) Substantive analysis is the processing of descriptive data from the field using analytical instruments based on theory, research, or systematic studies pertinent to the research topic. This analysis is intended to facilitate the comprehension of social construction and provide an overview in accordance with established research priorities.

3. Result and Discussion
## 3.1. Haunting Narratives and Cultural Materialism Perspective

It is crucial to comprehend that within this discussion, the term ghost in sociological connotation referred to a metaphorical portrayal of inarticulate occurrences, and a 'haunting' reminder of the repression and injustice that exist in our intricate social relationships – rather than a representation of deceased people (Gordon, 2008). In this respect, the amorphous feature of ghost is an essential depiction about the lingering reminiscence that often overlooked and dismissed by the society – which then awaits to be reconciled (Gordon, 2008:). Therefore, we could understand that the cognitive construction of ghost renders the unsaid demands from the deceased to the living one – to uphold the justice and truth that they cease to attain (Thomspon, 2019). However, instead of interpreting this conception as the attempt to revise the part of history, it is rather paramount to perceive it as a catalyst to ponder about the problem that has been sustained until present times, and to reimagine the world that we live in if such injustice does not take place to begin with (Lawther, 2021).

Anthropologist whose expertise in folklore and mythology namely Tok Thompson (2019) illustrates these premises through the exploration of United States' folklores – which appeared to depict ghosts as the oppressed individual and/or communities that suffered from torture and slavery such as native American tribe and African-American community. The same case study also asserted by Cheryl Lawther (2021) who debunk the riddle about the Northern Ireland's transgenerational haunting narratives – which nurtured by the community who withstand a predicament and suffered from a traumatic conflict. Such findings affirm that the imperative of ghost plays a significant role to illustrate how the devastation that caused by war, servitude, oppression, torture, extermination, genocide, and even colonization could create an affliction that amplifies beyond the space and time (Schindel, 2014). In this manner, such narratives reflect moral responsibility to create a better world and to avert the same atrocities from happening in the future.

Despite being able to reimagine the existence of ghost, debunking the various haunting narratives into logical premises that reflect the 'truth', obviously required a different approach. In this manner, according to the materialist approach, 'truth' can only be established by a direct experience with the physical world. Hence, the materialist firmly refutes the idea of deriving the truth from non-physical realms. In anthropological perspectives, the basic principle of materialism was furtherly contextualized to explain the impact of tangible environment in shaping the human civilization, and came to questions the relevance of supernatural forces behind the creation of various cultures and beliefs. Such approach was proposed by Marvin Harris, who introduce a theory namely *Cultural Materialism* – which aimed to provide logical and evidence-based explanation about the emergence and massification of certain beliefs within the society.

Operationally, cultural materialism provides an explanation about the emergence of cultural variations in society by dividing the component of our socio-cultural system into three different layers, which consist of: (1) the infrastructure; (2) the structure, and; (3) the superstructure. In this respect, the cultural materialist advocates the view that the very first layer – the infrastructure, which comprise mode of production (e.g., technological advancement, working patterns, environment, etc.) and mode of reproduction (e.g., demography, fertility, mortality, etc.) as the variables which underlie the material realities in society and shapes the other two subsequent facets of culture (Buzney et al., 2017). Consequently, the domestic and familial relations, as well as the political economy, fall under the "structure" category of the system, while intellectual and symbolic elements (e.g., myth, religion, literature, art, etc.) make-up the "superstructure" category (Buzney et al., 2017). For this reason, cultural materialists attribute much of societal formation to technology and economic aspects of daily life. In this

respect, we could say that cultural materialists seek, from a purely scientific perspective, to decipher how the technical, economic, and demographic aspects of our everyday life shape the "structure" and "superstructure" of the society (Buzney *et al.*, 2017).
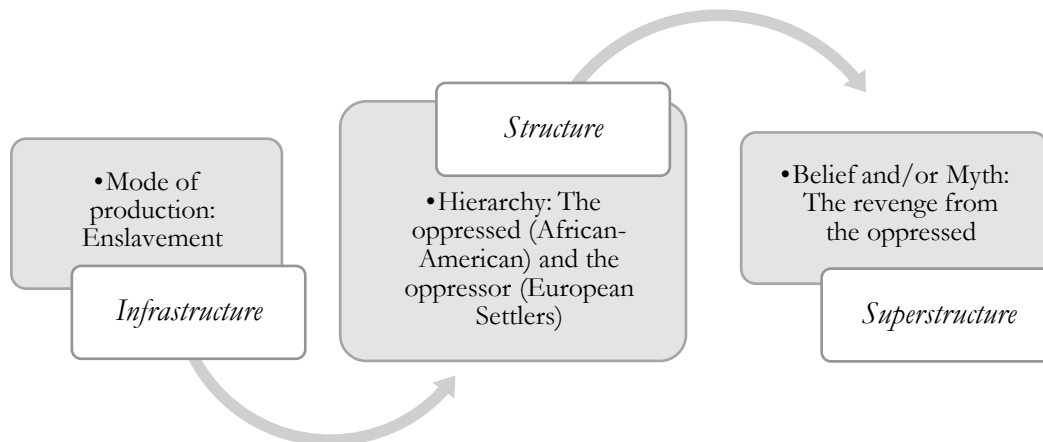
Figure 1. Analysis of The Cultural Materialism Aspect in The "African-American" Ghost Story

In this case, the premises of cultural materialism will help us to identify how the scarcity of resources and poverty; demographic shifts and composition; ecological variations and technological advancements, are often playing a significant role on the creation of communal beliefs, including the beliefs and/or myth about ghost (Buzney *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, combining this approach with the aforementioned case from Tok Thompson (2019), we could make an initial analysis as illustrated above by figure 1.

3.2. From Poverty to Prostitution: Historical Backdrop of Women's Oppression in Indonesia

The vast majority of research in Indonesia considered the prevalence of female ghost as the epitome of systemic victimization towards women within the patriarchal structure of the society (as contended by Napitupulu 2014; Rastiti, 2018; Karnanta, 2018; Permatasari *et al.*, 2019; Saputra, *et al.*, 2019; Urahmah, 2022; Annisa, *et al.*, 2022;). Apart from that, few numbers of research also raise the issue of violence and objectification (i.e., power relation) as the main driver of women's overrepresentation in ghost stories (as asserted by Kusuma *et al.*, 2010; Agustiningsih, *et al.*, 2019; Sutandio, 2022; Frolova, 2021; Azizah *et al.*, 2023). However, this predisposition neglects the fact that the "patriarchal structure" and "power relation" is not an autonomous part of our socio-cultural system that could establish itself. Despite being able to capture the recurring injustice towards women, this structural approach also misses the crucial underlying feature of gender-driven oppression in Indonesia – which mainly caused by economic factors and embedded working pattern that has been preserved throughout the generations.

In this sense, it is clearly difficult to capture the whole history of centuries-long deprivation and segregation that Indonesian women experienced. However, we could agree over the fact that for most of the colonized third-world countries like Indonesia, the agricultural sector, rural environment, subsistence economic pattern, and dependency towards natural resources have strongly influenced the structural relations (e.g., gender roles and labor division) within the society. In this schematic way of thinking, the ability of performing several physical tasks was attached to men, whereas women were rather often perceived as the symbol of nurture and thus subjected to a more domestic aspect of the social structure (Coldwell, 2007). Although such

traditional notion has been challenged by numerous empirical findings that indicate the equal role and responsibility of women in agricultural activities, it is rather adequate evidence to comprehend that the gender role and even power relations is stipulated by the production and reproduction ability of our society.

Problem emerged when the agrarian economy failed to provide a proper and decent living condition for women. Mundayat *et al.* (2008) suggest that the massive influx of women labor in Indonesia was primarily induced by the prolonged poverty and the failure of agrarian system to sustain the well-being of the community. As the results, more women are breaking the glass-ceiling to work outside their traditional gender role (Mundayat *et al.*, 2008). Retrospectively, this trend has been very apparent ever since Indonesia underwent the colonization of Netherlands. In this respect, prolonged poverty, the city's attractiveness, the gentrification in few major cities during the colonization era, the monetization system of the colonizer, and the colonial labor system have widely contributed to the massification of prostitution (Prasetyo, 2016). Concurrently, prostitution emerge to became a popular "entertainment" and occupation across Java, especially in the major ports and garrison towns, where sailors and soldiers from mainland Europe were residing in considerable numbers (Prasetyo, 2016).

Furthermore, in 1778, workers in Batavia and Bogor frequently spent their earnings on *Ronggeng* (traditional dance that often modified as a sexual attraction), opium, alcohol, and prostitutes (Prasetyo, 2016). Since 1800's, it was common to offer laborers (particularly the single ones) prostitution and *Ronggeng* as a form of compensation by the company (Prasetyo, 2016). Alongside such practices, prostitution and alcohol also became more prevalence among the *Priyayi* (elite class in traditional Javanese society) in *Kasunanan Surakarta* (Prasetyo, 2016). Consequently, a phrase *wanita peoblik* (public women) was commonly used to objectify women who sought for a better living through prostitution (Prasetyo, 2016). Apart from that, the massive influx of prostitution during the colonial era also exacerbated by the native mothers who often exploit their children to engage in prostitution (Prasetyo, 2016). As the corollary impact to this major moral and economical shift in the society, several problems start to emerge, such as: the increasing rate of criminalities including rape and femicide; the widespread of sexually transmitted diseases; the prevalence of underage and unwanted pregnancies, and; the practices of abortion.

This construction is inherited through generations and articulated by a lot of communities into various context and stories. Several ghost stories that firstly documented throughout 1600's-1900's often depicted female ghost as a victim of gender-based violence, for example: *Sundel Bolong* (a prostitute with perforated back) who died while having a pregnancy which resulted from rape; *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol* (the sweetheart of Ancol's bridge) a poor orphan who died for rejecting the enforced marriage with a landlord and end up being raped, and; *Kuntilanak* (ghost in veiled) who also depicted died while having a pregnancy resulted from rape. In more contemporary tradition, working environment also emerge as the domain of violence. Some popular ghost story like *Suster Ngesot* (shoving nurse) depicted a woman as the victim of rape and murder committed by her co-worker in the hospital. On the other side, several vengeful spirits such as *Kuyang* from Kalimantan and *Leak* from Bali also depicted as the women who lived under prolonged deprivation and sought for a better life through black magic practices.
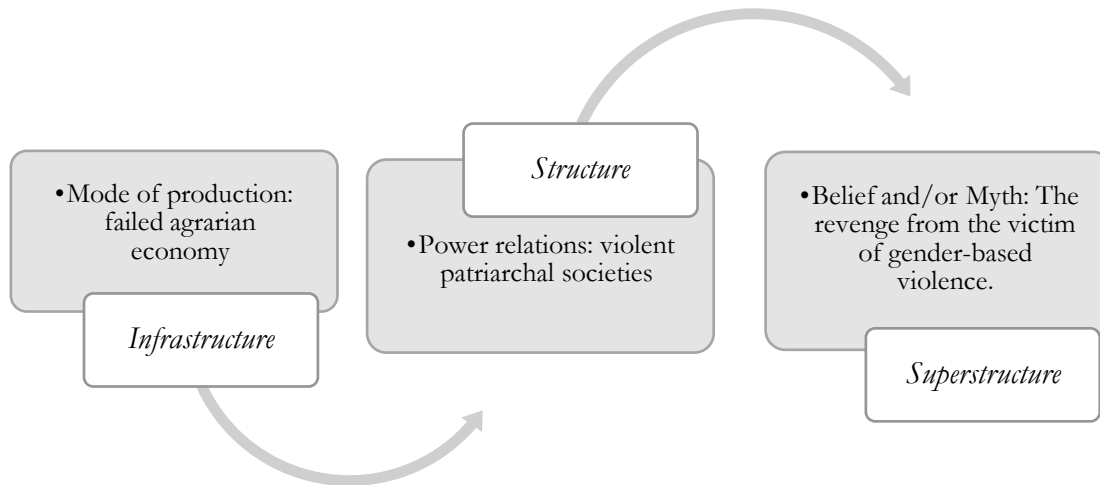
Figure 2. The Failure of Agricultural System That Enhance The Patriarchal Structure Within The Society

Therefore, through this concise explanation, we could eventually identify that the most impactful socio-cultural infrastructure that shaped the violent and misogynistic societal construction in Indonesia is the failed agrarian economy – which induces the emergence of various corollary problems, such as: (1) prolonged poverty; (2) widespread of prostitution; (3) increasing criminalities; (4) worsening situation of women's reproductive health, etc. As the agrarian economy failed to provide a decent living condition in general, more women are taking part in public domain and breaking the traditional gender roles that once sustained by the agrarian economy itself. In this sense, instead of getting an equal position with men, women are furthermore subjected into a lower stratum where they encountered various form of direct and indirect violence (illustrated by figure 2). At the same time, the failure of agrarian economy in Indonesia does not affected men, as much as it affected women – due to the fact that more men are occupying the non-agricultural public works to begin with. Hence, it is women who should shift and readjust their position in the society, which eventually would cost them a centuries-long violation and oppression.

On the other hand, the ghosts of the past, "...*demand that we work to make our lives meaningful by appreciating their struggle*..." (Harris, 2014). Therefore, after this reflection, the narratives of haunting shall be treated beyond than just a "spiritual excess" between the past and the present, as well as a mere remembrance and tribute – since for certain survivors and victims' alike, this story acted as a catalyst between beings and denoting the capacity of narratives about injustice to live in the present and the future. In a more sensible manner, we could argue that the preservation of haunting narratives demands us, that the lived one, to be more responsible towards the failure of the "structure" in our socio-cultural construction (Figure 2).

3.3. The 'Ghost' in Present Times: Unending Injustice and Preserved Memories

After finally able to identify the basic socio-cultural infrastructure that shape the power relation between men and women in Indonesia, the only remaining question that we must address is why such haunting narratives are still preserved until present times? One of the basic answers to this question is the fact that various injustice faced by women in Indonesia is rather recurring and even developing in accordance to the modernity and current socio-economic backdrop of the nation. In this sense, the recurring injustice and violence are accumulated into transgenerational trauma that had not been formally settled through a proper improvement in

the society (Lawther, 2021). One of the instances that demonstrates this premises is the fact that throughout 2015-2019 the proportion of women who live in poverty in Indonesia is still higher than the men who live in the same condition (Anggraeni, 2020). In this respect, the failure to improve the living condition for women hindered the creation of equal access to public domain, whether it is education, health services, and even employment.

In this respect, the existence of the ghost could be perceived as the bearer of the dead's legacies and demands (Lawther, 2021). Living with, talking to, and discussing about spirits then should be treated as the way to recover the justice. On the other hand, the engagement with ghosts entails a grief, memory, and inheritance politics that allows for a range of relationships with the past (Lawther, 2021). Reckoning with ghosts, for example, via procedures of truth recovery or restitution, does not erase the historical aspect of the narratives but remains focused on the present: "...*because ultimately, haunting is about transforming a shadow of a life into an undiminished existence whose shadows touch delicately in the spirit of a peaceful reunion...*" (Lawther, 2021). Therefore, although data and mere contextualization with the current gender-violence rates in Indonesia may sounds superficial – such reflection is essentially needed to rationalize the mystification of female ghosts in Indonesia.

Several deprivations that experienced by ghosts such *Sundel Bolong* and *Kuntilanak* who died while being pregnant also continued to be reflected by the increasing number of maternal mortality rate in Indonesia which increases from: 4,226 cases in 2018; 4,221 cases in 2019; 4,627 cases in 2020; to 7,389 cases in 2021 (Sadya, 2022). Apart from that, the violence that experienced by *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol* also remained apparent – periodic report from Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Children's Protection shows that the sexual violence always takes higher proportion in comparison to physical violence. The survey recorded that among the women whose age 15 to 64 years old, there are 18.1% women who experienced physical violence while there are 24.2% who suffered from sexual violence in 2016 (Dhini, 2021). Whereas in 2021, there are 13.8% women with the same range of age who received physical violence and 18.7% who became a victim of sexual violence (Dhini, 2021). It is even compounded by the fact that 93% of sexual assault survivors in Indonesia opted to remain silent and not reporting the violence in 2016 – due to the hesitation of bearing further stigmatization, irresponsive authorities, and impartial law enforcement (VOA Indonesia, 2016).

Even though the amount of violence towards women in Indonesia is gradually decreasing, the variety of the violence itself is generally growing, and permeated into various context and setting. UN Women classify the gender-based violence (GBV) as follows: (1) domestic violence which include economic, emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual violence; (2) femicide and honor killing; (3) sexual violence which include rape, corrective rape practices, and the rape culture; (4) human trafficking towards women; (5) female genital mutilation; (6) child or underage marriage, and; (7) digital violence which include cyberbullying, non-consensual sexting, and doxing. This wide spectrum of violence that we have today suggest that we are currently facing an even more pervasive and multidimensional problem compared to the one that we have in the past.

At the same time, although pro-women policies are currently flourishing in Indonesia – which indicated by the newly ratified legislation for the eradication of sexual violence (*Undang-Undang No. 12 Tahun 2022*), it is never be an easy task to achieve any policy outcomes that include women as its main determinant (Santoso, 2014). The pro-women policy network (i.e., NGOs, CSOs, and women legislators) are often encounter strong resistance and reluctance from the government, conservative lawmakers, and the public in general (Poerwandari *et al.*, 2018). There are several things that stand in the way of achieving gender equality, including a lack of

communal awareness about this respective topic, a rejection of pro-women ideas, religious teachings that restrict women's rights, impartiality before the eyes of bureaucracy, and the political attitudes of lawmakers (Poerwandari *et al.*, 2018). In this sense, the image of ghost itself has transformed to not only become a visualization of vengeful and bloody character, but even scarier – data and numbers that reflect a real tragedy and horrors.

From such reflection, we could comprehend that the ghost stories preserved as the reminder for us about previous moral transgressions and emphasized a feeling of ethical obligation and awareness about the recontinuing tragedy towards women (Thomson, 2019). Such stories signify a transcendental ethical notion rather than a just pragmatic one – which appear to be frequently optimistic, in the sense that past wrongs may sometimes be atoned for and forgiven if the necessary actions are made (Thomson, 2019). Therefore, the ghosts potentially can no longer haunt us, only if the justice is essentially "improved and repaired" – which then reflected by the gender mainstreaming agenda in various legislation in Indonesia (Thomson, 2019). Through this effort, we could understand that the ghost tales offer a voice and solace to the downtrodden and those who have been morally abused, while also ensuring that the same occurrence would not appear all over again in the future.

4.   Conclusion

From the analysis and discussion above, we can draw the conclusion that the abundance of haunting narratives about female ghosts in Indonesia are mainly driven by the failure of agrarian economy to provide proper and decent living condition for women. This phenomenon forced women to step outside the traditional gender roles and involve in numerous public domain which predominantly has been occupied by men. Instead of getting an equal position with men, women are rather restrained by the patriarchal structure – which led to the massification of violence and oppression. These problems remained until present times and mainly contribute to the perpetuation of several ghost stories and haunting narratives that reflects the recurring injustice and oppressions towards women. Eventually, we can conclude that these narratives serve as: (1) reminder about the recurring oppression towards women; (2) exigent call for reconciliation and better law enforcement; (3) pre-emptive socio-cultural narratives for protection and deterrent against the violence, and; (4) lesson learned for future improvement in various aspects of our society.

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