

THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC IDENTITY BEHIND THE SCREEN

Indonesian Horror Films, 1980-2020

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Abstract: This study examines the representation of Islamic identity in Indonesian horror films from the 1980s to the 2020s. Employing an interpretive qualitative method, this study analyzes selected horror films from each decade to uncover patterns of change in the portrayal of Islamic identity through narrative, symbolism, and character depiction. The findings reveal three key trends: first, during the 1980s and 1990s, Islamic identity was prominently depicted through characters such as *Kiai* or *Ustaz*, who served as exorcists. Second, in the 2000s, representations of Islamic identity diminished, replaced by themes of secularism and eroticism. Third, in the 2020s, Islamic identity re-emerged more explicitly, with stronger Islamic themes present in both storylines and visual symbols. These findings suggest that the portrayal of Islam in Indonesian horror films reflects not only the socio-cultural dynamics of society but also market strategies aimed at appealing to a predominantly Muslim audience. This research contributes to interdisciplinary studies on Islam, popular culture, and Indonesian film while paving the way for further inquiries into the relationship between religion and mass media.

Keywords: Islamic identity, horror film, popular culture.

Introduction

Horror films are a universal genre¹ characterized by themes related to fear, monsters, murder, and revenge.² In recent years, the popularity

¹ Stephen Prince, *The Horror Film* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2024)

² Stephen Prince, *The Horror Film* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Amnon Kabatchnik, *Horror on the Stage: Monsters, Murders and Terrifying Moments in Theater* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2023)

of horror films has grown steadily,³ making them a focal point for researchers. Contemporary studies on horror films have explored various aspects, including their representation of philosophical themes like emptiness, loneliness, and absence, as well as horror⁴; their connections to political contexts⁵; their interpretation through reader semiotics⁶; their portrayal of black skin and associated stereotypes,⁷ and their basis in ancient folklore,⁸ such as werewolf legends.⁹ Compared to other genres, horror films possess unique characteristics that make them a powerful medium for understanding cultural values, beliefs, and collective societal fears. They are not merely a form of entertainment but also a reflection of the community's social, spiritual, and moral concerns. The genre's exploration of fear—whether of the supernatural, evil, or the unknown—provides insight into the complex relationships between humans, religion, tradition, and social change.

In Indonesia, horror films are strategically positioned in cultural and industrial contexts. In 2023, 40.16% of all Indonesian film productions belonged to the horror genre, making it the dominant category in the national film industry.¹⁰ In addition, horror films such

³ Botond László Kiss et al., “The role of Excitement and Enjoyment Through Subjective Evaluation of Horror Film scenes,” *Scientific Reports* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-53533-y>

⁴ Lorenz Engell, “Horror as Film Philosophy,” *Philosophies* 9, no. 5 (2024): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9050146>

⁵ Mark Storey, “1973 and the American Horror Film: Political futurity in the Exorcist and the Texas Chain Saw Massacre,” *Horror Studies* 15, no. 1 (2024): 25--39.

⁶ George Vincent Gamayo, Jessa Ericka C. Bien-Munsayac, and Reyjane Calicdan-Del Campo, “Resistance, Conformity, and Negotiation to Socio-cultural Anxieties: A Semiotic Reading of Female Aswang Characters in Selected Philippine Horror Films,” *Malaysian Journal of Communication* 41, no. 1 (2024): 447--464.

⁷ Andrés Emil González, “Hands across Black America: Visions of Isolation and Social Life in Modern Black Horror Film,” *Studies in the Fantastic* 16, no. 1 (2024): 94-123.

⁸ L.B. Bailey, “How horror films construct Blackness: examples of White supremacist media's enforcement of necropolitics in film genres,” *Feminist Media Studies* 24, no. 8 (2024), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2358098>

⁹ Alexander A Sinityn, “Ancient Horror Story About A Werewolf In Petronius' Novel “Satyricon” And Federico Fellini's Film “A Marriage Agency,” *Scholae. Философское Антикведение II Классическая* 18, no. 1 (2024): 64-79.

¹⁰ Goodstats, “Indonesian Film Industry Dominated by Horror Releases in 2023,” <https://data.goodstats.id/statistic/industri-film-indonesia-didominasi-rilis-horor-pada-2023-Bg3Cn> accessed on 12 October 2024.

as *KKN di Desa Penari* (2022) and *Pengabdian Setan 2: Communion* (2022) achieved a historic success, drawing over 10 million and 6.39 million viewers, respectively.¹¹ This dominance underscores the genre's strong appeal and highlights its academic significance as a research subject.

In Indonesia, horror films began to emerge around the 1960s, marked by the release of *Badai Laut Selatan* (1962), starring WD Mochtar. The genre flourished during the 1980s with the production of notable films such as *Sundel Bolong* (1981), *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (1981), *Telaga Angker* (1984), and *Malam Satu Suro* (1988). Indonesian horror films often explore themes of violence,¹² morality,¹³ and sexuality.¹⁴ Additionally, they serve as a reflection of the cultural identity of Indonesian society,¹⁵ which holds strong beliefs in local traditions and urban legends. This connection to cultural identity is evident in films such as *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (1981), *Sundel Bolong* (1981), *Hantu Jeruk Purut* (2006), *Kuntilanak* (2006), and *Jailangkung* (2017). Despite their popularity, Indonesian horror films must compete with other genres, such as romance or historical dramas, for audience attention.

Researchers have conducted various studies on Indonesian horror films in the past five years, exploring various perspectives. These include Indonesian horror films in the context of ghost characters representing antagonistic roles,¹⁶ the portrayal of *pocong* ghosts,¹⁷ the

¹¹ Republika, "Often Crowded, why do Indonesians Like Horror Films?," <https://amecera.republika.co.id/berita/rogkbp425/sering-ramai-mengapa-film-horor-disukai-orang-indonesia> accessed on 12 October 2024; Indonesian Films, "Data on the number of Indonesian film viewers," <https://filmindonesia.or.id> accessed on 12 October 2024

¹² Suma Riella Rusdiarti, "Children, Violence, and Problems of Ratiocination in Indonesian Horror Movies," *International Journal of Indonesian Studies* (2018): 83-92.

¹³ Redi Panuju, "Hidden Moral Messages In Indonesian Horror Films (Analysis of Palasik Films)," *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention* 6, no. 2 (2019): 5273-5281.

¹⁴ Anggit Pangastuti, "Female Sexploitation in Indonesian Horror Films: Sundel Bolong (A Perforated Prostitute Ghost, 1981), Gairah Malam III (Night Passion III, 1996), and Air Terjun Pengantin (Lost Paradise-Playmates in Hell, 2009)," PhD dissertation, Auckland University of Technology, (2019).

¹⁵ Karl G Heider, *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Justito Adiprasetyo, "Deconstructing fear in Indonesian Cinema: Diachronic Analysis of Antagonist Representations in Half A Century of Indonesian Horror Films 1970-2020," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2023): 1-16.

construction of fear as designed by filmmakers,¹⁸ elementary school students' writings about Indonesian horror films,¹⁹ horror films featuring female protagonists battling ghosts,²⁰ the role of horror films in education,²¹ the desacralization of religiosity in horror narratives,²² linguistic and language aspects of horror films,²³ the representation of women in horror films,²⁴ and comparisons between Indonesian horror films and their American counterparts.²⁵ These studies are particularly fascinating as they examine Indonesian horror films from diverse angles, including antagonist characterization, educational themes, and women's representation. Moreover, they delve into how horror films reflect and engage with local identities in Indonesia, showcasing the genre's cultural significance.

¹⁷ Justito Adiprasetyo and Annissa Winda Larasati, "Deconstructing *Pocong*, the Indonesian Sacred Ghost: A Diachronic Analysis of *Mumun* (2022), Indonesian Contemporary Horror Film," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (2023): 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2023.2230116>.

¹⁸ Atalia Praratya, Vidi Sukmayadi, and Kenmada Widjajanto, "Construction of Fear: A Shared Experience of Indonesian Independent Horror Moviemakers," *Studies in Media and Communication* 12, no. 4 (2024): 94-106. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i4.7102>

¹⁹ Ratmiati Ratmiati et al, "Analysis of Student's Writing Which Reflects Ghost Stories in Indonesian Horror Film," *Journal of Islamic Education Students (JIES)* 4, no. 1 (2024): 153-162 <http://dx.doi.org/10.31958/jies.v4i1.12238>

²⁰ Anton Sutandio, "The Final Girls in Contemporary Indonesian Horror Films: Reclaiming Women's Power," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2023): 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2186593>.

²¹ Putri Rindu Kinasih and Jazlyn Lacey, "Indonesian EFL students' elastic language in discussing horror movies," *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics (JELTL)* 9, no. 2 (2024): 211-225.

²² Dhama Suroyya, "Commodification and Desacralization of Religious Symbols in Indonesian Horror Movies," *IJIC: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Communication* 5, no. 1 (2022): 15-38.

²³ Jong Li Fa et al., "Language Style of Horror Movies and Audiences' Psychological Response," *Modality Journal: International Journal of Linguistics and Literature* 3, no. 2 (2023): 107-117; Kristophorus Divinanto Adi Yudono and Adi Wahono, "Imagery In Diosetta's "House of Fetal Sacrifices" Digital Horror Fiction: A Stylistic Study," In *International Conference of Humanities and Social Science (ICHSS)* (2022): 16-20.

²⁴ Verena Vinandia Larasati and Abdul Wahid, "Representation and Commodification of Female Bodies in the Indonesian Post Reform Horror Movies," *Asian Journal of Media and Communication* 4, no. 1 (2020): 41-48.

²⁵ Deswandito Saptanto and Ratih Nurjanah, "The Comparison and Fundamental Purpose of Existence Between Indonesian Versus American Urban Legends in the Movies," In *Proceedings International Conference on English Language Teaching, Literature, and Translation*, Semarang, 14-15 August 2021.

In recent decades, scholarly research on Indonesian horror films has expanded significantly, addressing various themes, including the representation of women, the construction of fear, and the desacralization of religiosity. However, studies examining the intersection of horror films and Islamic identity remain scarce. In fact, Islamic identity in horror films has a unique dimension that reflects how religion is integrated with popular culture. Islam is not confined to overtly religious films but is also present through specific symbols, narratives, and characters in horror films. The representation of Islam in this genre can be explicit, such as the depiction of a *Kiai* or *Ustaz* (Islamic religious leader) combating supernatural entities, or implicit, as seen in the subtle incorporation of minimalist Islamic symbols.

This study aims to address the existing gap by examining the changes in the representation of Islamic identity in Indonesian horror films from the 1980s to the 2020s. It analyzes the depiction of Islam and investigates how these changes reflect Indonesia's socio-cultural dynamics, including the influence of Islamization, secularism, and film market strategies. By employing an interpretive qualitative approach, this study evaluates patterns of Islamic representation in selected horror films from each period. It seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary research at the intersection of religion, popular culture, and film, while expanding the understanding of Islam's role in Indonesian mass media, which vastly expands in recent decades.²⁶ The study of identity relates to the perception and reflection of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism.²⁷ Historically, the study of identity originated in sociology and later extended to other disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, political science, and ethnic studies²⁸ Concerning religion, the study of religious identity has emerged as a field that explores how religion functions as an individual or collective identity,²⁹ in majority³⁰ or minority context,³¹

²⁶ Ahmad Nuril Huda, "The Rise of Cinematic Santri in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: Figure, Field and the Competing Discourse," *Studia Islamika* 30 (2023): 261-290.

²⁷ Amin Maalouf, *On Identity* (New York: Random House, 2011).

²⁸ Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1-47. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007068714468>

²⁹ William P. Marshall, "Religion as Ideas: Religion as Identity," *J. Contem. Legal Issues* 7 (1996), 385.

³⁰ Bilal Ahmad Malik, "Islam and Nationalist Mobilization In Kazakhstan: Post-Soviet Cultural [Re]Framing and Identity [Re]Making," *QIJIS Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no 2 (2023).

distinguishing one group from another in terms of behavior and socio-cultural relations within a society.

In contemporary times, religious identity manifests in various contexts, including fundamentalism, the desacralization of religion, terrorism, and secularism. Moreover, in today's digital and transnational era, religious identity emerges across diverse dimensions of space and time.³² It is expressed through films,³³ social media, games, and art, either explicitly or implicitly. In the digital age, religious identity has cultivated its followers and communities. When examined in the context of the film, Islamic identity is often linked to its role in *da'wah* (Islamic proselytization).³⁴ Films are a powerful medium for disseminating Islam to a broad and varied audience. As a form of digital media, film is considered one of the most effective and efficient tools for spreading Islamic *da'wah*. Consequently, many individuals and organizations concerned with promoting Islam try to use film as a medium for *da'wah*.³⁵ This approach is particularly appealing to millennials, who tend to favour film over traditional methods of religious teachings, such as grand religious lectures or studies. The accessibility and relatability of films make them a medium closely aligned with the preferences and habits of the millennial generation, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in communicating Islamic values.

Islamic identity is currently represented in various dimensions, including philosophical, psychological, socio-cultural, and political. From a global perspective, Islamic identity appears to be related to a significant transnational religion compared to other religions. It is frequently represented as a critical transnational religion with a big

³¹ I Nengah Punia, "Unveiling Bali's Hidden Facet: The Narrative Identity of the Pegayaman Village Muslim Community in Buleleng," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 18, no. 2 (2024), 403-426.

³² Lily Kong, "Religion and technology: Refiguring Place, Space, Identity and Community," *Area* 33, no. 4 (2001): 404-413.

³³ Peny Wulandari, Harry Bawono, "Struggling for Recognition: Archived-based Documentary Film of the Ahmadiyya Jamaat in Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ab: Journal of Islamic Studies* 61, no. 2 (2023), 393-417.

³⁴ Ahmad Nuril Huda, "Filming Ayat-Ayat Cinta: The Making of a Muslim Public Sphere in Indonesia," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 4, no. 1 (2010): 43-61.

³⁵ Afdal Zikri, Fitri Handayani, and Jamal Mirdad, "Analysis of Horror Film Content as Digital Media for Islamic Dakwah," *Abdurrauf Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2024): 115-125.

wave opposing the West and secularism.³⁶ Additionally, in the eyes of some non-Muslims, Islamic identity is often linked to perceptions of global terrorism.³⁷ This association has contributed to the construction of Islam as a religion that is feared by many non-Muslims on a worldwide scale. However, for Muslims their identity is reflected from many rituals that they preserve amidst the invasion of modernity to their lives.³⁸

This study also incorporates Hall's concept of identity, which views representation as a dynamic process through which cultural meanings and identities are constructed and negotiated³⁹. This perspective provides a framework for exploring how horror films depict Islam, both explicitly and implicitly. Additionally, Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine is employed to analyze the interplay between the representation of ghosts, gender, and religion⁴⁰ in Indonesian horror narratives. Furthermore, Taylor's critique of secularism examines how the themes of secularism and eroticism⁴¹ in 2000s horror films reflect broader social transformations. These theoretical frameworks collectively enable a nuanced understanding of Indonesian horror films' intersections between religion, culture, and cinematic narratives.

This study employs a qualitative research method, focusing on the verbal narration of research data⁴² with findings constructed through in-depth interpretation⁴³ to provide a nuanced understanding of the

³⁶ Steward Harrison Oppong, "Religion and Identity," *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 3, no. 6 (2013): 10-16.

³⁷ Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman, "Terrorism: An identity theory perspective," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 6 (2009): 537-559.

³⁸ Abdul Wahid, and Syukri. "Khataman Practice Among Bimanese Muslims: Navigating Tradition, Modernity and the Formation of Religious and Social Identities," *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 19, no. 1 (2024): 112-140.

³⁹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989): 68-81.

⁴⁰ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2022)

⁴¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴² Sandra L. Faulkner and Joshua D. Atkinson. *Qualitative Methods in Communication and Media* (London: Oxford University Press, 2024).

⁴³ Anas Ahmadi, "Masculinities to Trans-femininities: Evidence Through the "Girl" Film," *Masculinities and Social Changes* 13, no. 1 (2024): 63-82.

subject matter.⁴⁴ Film selection is guided by criteria such as popularity, critical reception, and thematic relevance to representing Islamic identity. The chosen films are justified based on their exploration of explicit or implicit representations of Islam and their influence on popular cultural discourse. These films represent their popularity and significance in reflecting shifts in cultural values, including eroticism and religiosity, within the context of Indonesian horror films. The analysis follows three stages (1) visual representation, which examines Islamic symbols such as clothing, rituals, and locations; (2) narrative structure, which analyzes the roles of religious figures and their relationship to horror elements; and (3) temporal comparison, which investigates thematic and representational shifts across decades. The stages of analysis refer to Miles and Huberman, namely through identification, classification, reduction, exposure, and verification of data⁴⁵ related to Islamic identity in Indonesian horror films. Peer discussions were conducted to obtain constructive feedback⁴⁶ from theoretical, methodological, and analytical perspectives to ensure validity. Additionally, intersubjectivity techniques were employed to minimize research subjectivity in analyzing data and constructing findings, thereby enhancing the reliability and rigour of the study.

Horror Films in Indonesia in the 1980s-1990s: Islam and Exorcisms

Horror films, popular among audiences of all ages—children, teenagers, and adults—are often closely associated with the theme of exorcism.⁴⁷ This theme arises from the portrayal of antagonistic figures such as demons or ghosts that disrupt human life.⁴⁸ Exorcism is depicted as a response to these disturbances, carried out by religious

⁴⁴ Anas Ahmadi, “Study of Criminal Psychology in Indonesian Literature,” *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* 9 (2020): 1285-1291. <https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2020.09.147>

⁴⁵ Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (London: Sage, 1994).

⁴⁶ Nelson CC Chen and Chia-Ju Liu, “Explore the Effectiveness of Conceptual Change with Peer Discussion,” In *Asia-Pacific Forum on Science Learning and Teaching* 18, no. 1 (2017): 1-2.

⁴⁷ Douglas E. Cowan, “Horror and the Demonic,” In *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (London: Routledge, 2009): 403-419.

⁴⁸ Ryan G. Duns, *Theology of Horror: The Hidden Depths of Popular Film* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024).

figures or spiritual teachers who are portrayed as protagonists. These rituals are performed individually or in groups, utilizing religious practices to confront and expel supernatural entities. Interestingly, horror films sometimes depict these religious figures being defeated by the demons or ghosts they attempt to exorcise. This defeat is often attributed to the relative inadequacy of the religious figure's abilities compared to the supernatural power of the entities they face. Exorcisms in these films can be categorized into two types: those involving demons or ghosts with their own physical forms and those where these entities possess or transform into other individuals, necessitating their removal from the host.

In the 1980s, Islamic elements began appearing in Indonesian horror films, particularly those starring Suzanna. For instance, in *Sundel Bolong* (1981), the story narrated a woman who committed suicide and became a *sundel bolong* ghost, wandering in search of revenge against those who had raped her. In the film, a *Kiai* character plays a pivotal role, providing insight and enlightenment about the ghost's nature. The *Kiai* was depicted as a man wearing traditional Islamic attire, including a cap, a long shirt, and a turban. At one point, the *Kiai* explained, "Alisa is Sinta too. She will appear as Sinta when she meets you but as *sundel bolong* when confronting her enemies." Once the *sundel bolong* had avenged herself, the *Kiai* performed an exorcism using Islamic prayers to banish her. By the end of the film, the *sundel bolong* vanished. In this film, Islamic identity is represented through the character of a *Kiai* who served as an exorcist. As a religious leader with Islamic knowledge, the *Kiai* led the *sundel bolong* ghost's exorcism with assistance from several others. Ultimately, the ghost disappeared and returned to the afterlife. Notably, there was no physical confrontation between the *Kiai* and the ghost in this film. Instead, the *Kiai* relies solely on prayers to perform the exorcism.

The film *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* (1981) tells the story of a woman named Murni who sought revenge after being wronged by her fellow villagers. The villagers had thrown her into a ravine, and her anger was further fueled by her former lover, who not only abandoned her after taking her virginity but also spread slander, accusing her of being a witch. In the film, Islam is represented through the character of Permana, a Banten man who served as the imam at the village prayer house and worked to strengthen Islamic teachings within the community. Permana confronted Murni, who possessed black magic, and ultimately

defeated her. Additionally, Permana overcame Gendon, Murni's teacher and mentor in the dark arts.

Through this film, Islamic identity is portrayed through the character of Permana, who is depicted as young and prominent. Permana conducted exorcisms and resistance against individuals practicing black magic, namely Murni and Gendon. Unlike some depictions of religious figures, Permana, as a man with deep spiritual knowledge, did not rely solely on prayers to confront those wielding black magic. He also engaged in physical combat with them. In the Western context, individuals practicing black magic are often referred to as witches. By the film's end, Permana ultimately defeats the witches.

The film *Telaga Angker* (1984) tells the story of a married couple, Robby and Anita. One day, criminals broke into their home, ransacked it, raped Anita's sister, and killed Anita. Her body was thrown into a lake. However, Anita's spirit began to wander, seeking revenge for her death and the suffering inflicted on her family. As a ghost, Anita hunted down and killed her enemies one by one, who were criminals, rapists, and murderers. In the film, Islamic identity is portrayed through the character of Wijaya, a man wearing a white turban and sarong. Wijaya confronted Anita's ghost and urged her to return to the realm of the dead. He recited holy verses from the Quran, which ultimately helped guide Anita's spirit back to the afterlife.



Caption 1: scene of a *kiai* wearing a turban and sarong reciting a prayer to exorcise ghosts (*Angker Lake*, 1984)

The film *Malam Satu Suro* (1988) narrates the story of a married couple, Bardo Ardiyanto and Suketi. Suketi, originally a ghost (*sundel bolong*), was transformed into a human by a shaman named Ki Renggo. Their peaceful life was disrupted by Bardo's business associate, Joni Kalomata. Joni and his accomplices removed the magical nail from Suketi's head, causing her to revert to her *sundel bolong* form. Furthermore, Joni and his friends kidnapped and murdered Bardo's son. Suketi, driven by vengeance, began to hunt down and kill those who had harmed her and her family, targeting evildoers, murderers, and rapists. The film presented an element of Islamic identity in its final segment, where a Muslim man, portrayed wearing a white turban and glasses, recited holy verses from the Quran. As these verses were chanted, Suketi gradually disappeared and returned to the afterlife.

The Indonesian film industry did not produce many Indonesian horror films in the 1990s. This period was even referred to as the "comatose state" for Indonesian horror films because of several factors (1) the emergence of many private television channels, which led people to shift their focus to television; (2) government policies related to film imports, which made Indonesian films less competitive; and (3) the sluggish Indonesian economy due to the monetary crisis during President Soeharto's era. However, there were still a few horror films produced in the 1990s. One example is *Ajian Ratu Laut Kidul* (1991), which tells the story of a female village head named Lestari. As the village head, Lestari faced opposition from Anggoro, a man who desired to take her position. Anggoro sought the help of a shaman to defeat and destroy Lestari's family. Lestari's brother and sister-in-law were killed, and she became so desperate that she contemplated suicide. Nyi Roro Kidul then helped Lestari recover from her trauma and grief. With her strength restored, Lestari sought revenge on Anggoro for the destruction of her family.

Islamic identity in Indonesian horror films from the 1980s to 1990s appeared in the form of *Kiai* or *Ustaz*, who acted as exorcists, giving rise to two perspectives. First, in this context, Islamic identity was presented as a symbol of Islam's power to confront and defeat ghosts. Islam was portrayed as the protagonist, appearing in a positive light in horror films. This representation of Islamic identity was

intended to offer the audience a positive image⁴⁹ while conveying a religious message. Second, the portrayal of Islamic identity through the figure of the *Kiai* or *Ustaz*, who performed exorcisms using prayers, led to the perception of Islam as merely a religion used for exorcising ghosts. This portrayal reduced the identity of Islam to a narrow role as if it were only relevant in the context of exorcism. Moreover, Islamic identity appeared infrequently in Indonesian horror films, weakening its presence. Whether acknowledged or not, one of the reasons for the emergence of Islamic identity in horror films was tied to the power dynamics of the Indonesian government during that period.

Indonesian Horror Films of the 2000s: From Eroticism to Secularism

Indonesian horror films in the 2000s saw a resurgence, coinciding with the improving Indonesian economy. This period marked the emergence of a variety of horror films in Indonesian cinemas, including *Kafir Satanic* (2002), *Peti Mati* (2003), *Kanibal: Sumanto* (2004), and *Keramat* (2009). These films continued to explore themes of local Indonesian cultural identity. Additionally, some Indonesian horror films began to incorporate themes of sexuality, blending eroticism with the horror genre. As in global horror films, sexuality, particularly as part of eroticism, became an essential element of the narrative.⁵⁰ Themes of sexual horror and erotic horror were increasingly intertwined with modern psychological fears.⁵¹ This eroticism often became a central driving force in the films,⁵² frequently portrayed through female characters and sometimes wrapped in elements of sexism.

⁴⁹ Muhammad Athari Basir, "Islamic Literature Criticism Of Horror Films: Analysis of Main Characters of Film *Munafik 2* (2018) and *Makmum* (2019)," *Al-Qanadir: International Journal of Islamic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2022): 116-125.

⁵⁰ Harriet Kimble Wrye, "Erotic Terror: Male Patients' Horror of the Early Maternal Erotic Transference," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (1993): 240 – 257.

⁵¹ Cynthia Hendershot, *I Was A Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001).

⁵² Ivri Kumin, "Erotic Horror: Desire and Resistance in the Psychoanalytic Situation," *International journal of psychoanalytic psychotherapy* 11 (1985): 3-25; Loh Maria H. "Introduction: Early Modern Horror," *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 3 (2011): 321-333..

In the 2000s, many Indonesian horror films prominently featured female sexuality⁵³, either as the main theme or as an interlude within the story. This trend led some to categorize these films as ‘pornographic’ due to their frequent emphasis on female sexuality⁵⁴. International adult film stars, mainly from Japan, also began appearing in lead roles in Indonesian horror films⁵⁵. Notable examples include *Menculik Miyabi* (2010) starring Miyabi, *Rayuan Arwah Penasaran* (2010) starring Leah Yuzuki, *Arisan Berondong* (2010) starring Erika Kirihara, *Suster Keramas 2* (2011) starring Sora Aoi, and *Suster Keramas* (2009) starring Rin Sakuragi. Market demands largely drove the rise of female sexuality in these films, as such content was seen as a major draw for audiences. However, this shift led to criticism that Indonesian horror films were exploiting women’s sexuality⁵⁶ rather than focusing on the aesthetics of horror itself. The inclusion of erotic scenes, such as kissing, wearing revealing or transparent clothing, and even explicit bed scenes, sparked significant controversy within Indonesian society.⁵⁷ Critics, mainly from religious circles, argued that these films prioritized lust over their potential to offer meaningful messages or societal education.⁵⁸ The solid erotic element also became a concern, especially when minors were among the viewers, as it raised questions about the appropriateness of such content for younger audiences.

The film *Suster Keramas* (2009), produced by Maxima Pictures, tells the story of a Japanese woman named Michiko who traveled to Indonesia in search of her sister, Kayla. During her journey, Michiko

⁵³ Primada Qurrota Ayun, “Sensuality and Women’s Bodies in Horror Films in Indonesia (A Study of Media Political Economy),” *Jurnal Simbolika: Research and Learning in Communication Study* 1, no. 1 (2015): 16-23.

⁵⁴ Erni Herawati, “Pornography in the guise of mystical horror films in Indonesia,” *Humaniora* 2, no. 2 (2011): 1408–1419. <https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniora.v2i2.3209>

⁵⁵ Wilis Windiasih, Taufik Suprihatini, and Triono Lukmantoro, “Adult Film Stars as Commodities in Indonesian Horror Films,” *Online Interactions* 1, no. 3 (2013): 1–7.

⁵⁶ Ajeng Febri Kusnita, “Exploitation of women in horror films (Discourse analysis of exploitation of women in Indonesian horror films of the 80s, 90s, and 2000s),” PhD dissertation, Sebelas Maret University (2010).

⁵⁷ Arfian Surya Suci Ramadhan et al., “Content Analysis of Exploitation and Blasphemy In Kiblat Movie Posters,” *Philosophy: Publication of Communication Science, Design, Art and Culture* 1, no. 3 (2024): 1-8.

⁵⁸ Meg Downes, “Countryside Horror versus Popular Morality: Questioning the Definition of Quality National Film,” *Indonesian Communication Journal* 3, no. 1 (2014): 1-23.

met a man who helped her and encountered a ghostly family. Eventually, Michiko found her sister, Kayla. However, the film placed more emphasis on eroticism, which was used as a means to attract the audience. Additionally, the actress portraying Michiko, Rin Sakuragi, was a Japanese porn star, further catering to the market's demand for titillating content. As a result, *Suster Keramas* was banned in Indonesia for being excessively erotic, sexist, and sensual, particularly in its treatment of women. There was no portrayal of Islamic identity throughout the film, which highlights the film's secular nature. The lack of religious representation in *Suster Keramas* aligns it with secularism, as there is no narrative surrounding religious figures, rituals, or symbols. This lack of representation is also evident in other Indonesian horror films, such as *Rayuan Arwah Penasaran* (2010). In *Rayuan Arwah Penasaran*, the main character, Bobby, frequently encounters the ghost of Ira, his lover who had committed suicide after being raped. Ira's ghost sought revenge on those who wronged her. Like *Suster Keramas*, this film did not introduce Islamic identity. The narrative focused solely on the ghost's journey of vengeance, without any connection to religious or supernatural resolutions.

Indonesian horror films of the 2000s, which feature increased eroticism, are categorized as reflecting secularism,⁵⁹ as they present a departure from the religious (mainly Islamic) themes. These films' religious or Islamic elements are increasingly absent, signaling a shift in the cinematic landscape. The loss of Islamic identity in films indicates that religion is no longer seen as an essential component of the genre. This absence implies that religion is unnecessary for these films' storytelling or cultural messaging. Furthermore, this shift reflects a broader transformation in the Indonesian horror film paradigm. The genre has moved from narratives that incorporate local identity and Islamic themes (such as the figure of the exorcist) to stories focused on eroticism, often with explicit sensual scenes. As an Eastern country, Indonesia traditionally considers topics related to eroticism and secularism as taboo, as they are seen as inconsistent with Eastern values and ethics. In this context, the role of the Lembaga Sensor Film (Film Censorship Institute) becomes critical, as it is responsible for censoring scenes that are perceived as overly erotic or secular in an

⁵⁹ Ahmada Auliya Rahman, "Pornography in Horror Films (Analysis of Pornographic Content in Indonesian Horror Films for the Period January-June 2009)," PhD dissertation, Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta (2011).

attempt to uphold cultural norms and prevent content deemed inappropriate for Indonesian audiences.

The Rise of Islamic Themes in Indonesian Horror Films (2020s)

Indonesian horror films have experienced a noticeable shift in themes, especially in the 2010s and 2020s. Films such as *Makmum* (2019), *Ghibah* (2021), *Sabur* (2021), *Sholat Sendirian* (2021), *Qodrat* (2022), *Buka Puasa* (2022), and *Siksa Kubur* (2024) demonstrate a clear emphasis on Islamic identity. In fact, the film titles that also appear explicitly use Islamic diction (from Arabic), including *makmum*, *ghibah*, *sabur*, *sholat*, and *qodrat*. Indonesian horror films also show a significant increase in presenting Islamic identity more complexly. This representation is not only symbolic but also becomes an integral narrative element. This marks the return of Islamic themes in Indonesian horror films. The representation of Islamic identity is no longer limited to exorcism but extends to exploring everyday religious life, such as prayer and ablution. This shift marks the return of Islamic themes in Indonesian horror films, reflecting broader societal trends, including the rise of Islamic religiosity. It also signals a growing demand for content that resonates with Muslim audiences, offering an alternative to the secular narratives of previous decades. With the increasing demand for Islamic content, horror films of this era reflect the close relationship between religion, popular culture, and the creative economy in Indonesia. Additionally, film production houses in Indonesia have also produced films that are purely Islamic-based, such as *Guru Bangsa Tjokroaminoto* (2015), *Ajari Aku Islam* (2019), and *Pesantren* (2022). These films focus on Islamic figures and the essence of Islam, further contributing to the growing presence of Islamic narratives in Indonesian cinema.



Caption 2: scene when the character of *Ustaz* Ganda is praying and followed by a congregation (ghost)

The film *Makmum* (2019) is categorized as an Indonesian horror film with an Islamic theme due to its strong focus on Islamic identity. The film tells the story of women and men disturbed by ghosts during their prayers. The female characters—Nurul, Nisa, and Fitri—experienced paranormal disturbances while performing their prayers. The ghosts in the film are depicted as becoming followers during the women’s prayer. Although the physical form of the ghosts is not shown, their presence is conveyed through intangible voices, which enhance the eerie effect of the ghosts following the women in their prayers. This disturbance creates a sense of fear and unease for the women, as their prayers are interrupted by the ghostly presence. The act of the ghosts joining the prayer disrupts the humans’ ability to pray peacefully.

Likewise, *Ustaz* Ganda, when praying, is disturbed by ghosts. This film, *Makmum*, is categorized as combining Islamic identity with horror in a slightly different concept compared to previous horror films. In earlier horror films, Islamic identity was typically presented through exorcists who cured people possessed by ghosts, and ghosts were often shown to be afraid of the holy verses of the Quran. However, *Makmum* takes a different approach, as the ghosts in the film join the prayer with the imam. The film also presents Islamic identity through sequences showing women praying, men praying, women wearing

hijabs, men wearing *sarongs*, and exorcisms. From an Islamic perspective, the ghosts in the film are categorized as *jinn*s.⁶⁰

Other films, such as *Qodrat* (2022), further explore Islamic identity, presenting the character of *Ustaz* as the main figure who not only acts as an exorcist but also faces personal and spiritual conflicts. This portrayal shows the human dimension of religious figures and reflects a more nuanced and complex approach to representing Islam. The strong representation of Islam in these films is supported by religious symbols such as the *hijab*, mosque, prayer, and ablution, which are not just aesthetic elements but integral parts of the story. This shift towards Islamic themes in Indonesian horror films can be seen as a response to the majority Muslim audience in Indonesia, who are more drawn to films that align with their religious and cultural identity. The categorization of *jinn*s in these films is also significant, as some *jinn*s disturb humans while others do not. According to Islamic belief, *Jinn*s reside in a separate realm from humans. Still, when they enter the human world, they typically disturb human life, whether through interfering with worship or daily activities. The belief in *jinn*s is an essential part of the Islamic faith, as Muslims are required to believe in their existence as one of Allah's creations, living side by side with humans. In this context, the shift in film themes toward more frequent incorporation of Islamic elements is closely tied to the majority of the audience in Indonesia, which is Muslim.

The trend of Indonesian horror films which increasingly feature Islamic themes gives rise to representations of the Islamization of Indonesia and the Indonesianization of Islam.⁶¹ The context of the representation shows that the atmosphere of Indonesian horror films 'opens a new direction' in the development of Islam in Indonesia which has tended to highlight sexism, secularism, murder, or comedy. This has caused pessimism among Indonesian film viewers who are Muslim so that they are reluctant to watch films. The reluctance to watch horror films is caused by films that do not present elements of Islam/Islamic education. On that basis, the rise of Indonesian horror films that raise Islamic themes has become an alternative media in the

⁶⁰ Ryzky Yan Deriza, Wira Alvio and Arafah Pramasto, "Stories of Dutch Ghost Figures in the Colonial Era in a Review of History and Islam," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 2 (2022): 130-151. <https://doi.org/10.33477/jsi.v11i2.3354>

⁶¹ Mark Cammack, "Indonesia's 1989 Religious Judicature Act: Islamization of Indonesia or Indonesianization of Islam?" *Indonesia* 63 (1997): 143-68.

development of Islamic preaching through horror films.⁶² Through the theme of the Islamic horror film, it is hoped that the audience will gain enlightenment related to Islam in an aesthetic form.

The rise of Islamic horror films in Indonesia serves an Islamic educational function that is presented in a digital context. In addition, from the perspective of the collective society that watches these films, Islamic horror can provide 'catharsis', namely a form of spiritual enlightenment.⁶³ Through horror films with Islamic themes, the audience (especially those who are Muslim) can gain spiritual insight related to death, illness, supernatural, prayers, spells, and also a sense of closeness to Allah. That way, horror films do not only bring up segments about illness, death, or accidents; rather, within an Islamic context, these elements are understood as part of Allah's divine destiny.

From a global perspective, the rise of Islamic-themed horror films in Indonesia has a promotional side. First, it shows the international world that Indonesian films are inseparable from Islamic *da'wah*. In addition, horror films with an Islamic theme on a global scale are the most popular and fastest spreading digital media for *da'wah*, especially among the younger generation who like horror films. Second, Islamic horror films in Indonesia can be an alternative research on Islam in relation to horror films. Third, Islamic horror films in Indonesia illustrate that Islam in films does not only appear as an exorcist or ritual so that it seems like a 'complement' in the film. The emergence of the theme of Indonesian horror films implicitly shows that Islam can also be the main theme in Indonesian horror films, not a 'complement' or just a 'seasoning' in Indonesian horror films. Fourth, from a popular culture perspective, Indonesian horror films give rise to a local Indonesian genre with an Islamic theme that is inseparable from the representation of politics, culture, religion, and power.

Conclusion

The identity of Islam as a religion is prominently featured in Indonesian horror films. This identity reflects the fact that Islam is the

⁶² Afdal Z., Fitri Handayani, and Jamal Mirdad, "Analysis of Horror Film Content as Digital Media for Islamic Dakwah," *Abdurrauf Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2024): 115-125.

⁶³ Bryan Stone, "The sanctification of fear: Images of the religious in horror films," *Journal of Religion & Film* 5, no. 2 (2001): 1-32.

majority religion in Indonesia. The emergence of Islamic identity in horror films serves as a strategic medium for *da'wah* (Islamic preaching), helping to spread Islam throughout the country. Furthermore, it has become a tool for global *da'wah*, introducing Islamic values to a broader audience. Historically, the representation of Islam in Indonesian horror films has evolved over the years, from the 1980s to the 2020s, marking a shift in how Islamic themes are portrayed within the genre.

First, the Islamic identity in Indonesian horror films of the 1980s is represented through the figures of *Kiai* or *Ustaz*, who perform exorcisms. In these films, Islamic or religious figures are portrayed as humans who combat evil, aligning with a common theme in horror films worldwide: the appearance of religious figures as exorcists or those who confront evil spirits. In this context, Islamic identity is depicted through protagonists who protect people from ghosts or exorcise these spirits (the antagonists). The resistance of religious figures (*Kiai* or *Ustaz*) in Indonesian horror films is always successful, highlighting the strength of Islamic identity as a force for good in the battle against evil. Furthermore, the representation of Islamic identity is reinforced through traditional attire, such as caps and sarongs, as well as the prayers recited by the *Kiai* or *Ustaz*. During exorcisms, the *Kiai* or *Ustaz* employs holy verses from the Qur'an to drive away evil spirits, ghosts, or demons. In this way, Islamic preaching remains a prominent feature in Indonesian horror films.

Second, the portrayal of Islamic identity in Indonesian horror films began to shift and disappear in the 2000s. During this period, Indonesian horror films no longer featured the figure of a *Kiai* or *Ustaz* as an exorcist and other Islamic identities were also absent. These films increasingly leaned toward secularism, focusing more on eroticism, often coupled with sexism and female sensualism. This shift was evident in the casting of porn stars in some Indonesian horror films. Additionally, the portrayal of eroticism in these films became more explicit, with scenes of sexual intercourse, kissing, bathing, and minimal clothing. In this era, Indonesian horror films began to emphasize lust and sensuality more than Islamic *da'wa*.

Third, Indonesian horror films in the 2020s predominantly feature Islamic themes. Several Indonesian horror film titles explicitly incorporate Islamic identity. This identity is strongly portrayed, evident in the use of women's clothing such as the hijab, men's attire like

sarongs, as well as depictions of mosques, prayers, and ablution. This portrayal suggests that Islamic identity in Indonesian horror films has experienced positive development. However, this shift is also closely tied to the target audience of Indonesian horror films, the majority of whom are Muslims.

The implications of this study suggest that the representation of Islamic identity in horror films is not only a reflection of Indonesian cultural values but also a response to market dynamics, the rise of the creative economy in Islamic-themed films, and the growing religiosity in Indonesian society. Islamic identity in these films is an effective means of *da'wah*, particularly through film, which resonates with a wider millennial audience. Future research could explore how audiences respond to this representation and its impact on the development of the Indonesian film industry, particularly in balancing religious values with commercial needs. []

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