

## The *No-Tahayul* Imposition on Malay Horror Films as a Religious Prescription: The Raison D'être and Its Effect on the Industry

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### ABSTRACT

*The Malay horror film industry has had a chequered history since the screening of its first locally produced movie Pontianak in 1957. Some scholars have written extensively on the ups and downs of the Malay horror movie industry and some researchers have done extensive research on the popularity of the genre among Malay viewers. Many others have contributed articles that add colour to issues germane to the industry. This paper, in its own small way, seeks to enrich discussion on the raison d'être, the reason or justification for being or reality of the Malay horror movies from a much-perceived perspective but one which has not been much articulated: the no tahayul prescription imposed on Malay horror movies by the Lembaga Penapis Filem (LPF) and its effects on the industry.*

**Keywords:** Malay Horror Films, Islam Tahayul, Lembaga Penapis Filem.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Malay movie industry is slowly inching its way towards becoming a key player in the creative market sector. The quality of production, acting skills, storyline and direction has improved somewhat over the years even though some might disagree with the statement. In its heydays during the fifties and sixties, the Malay movie industry was churning black-and-white films under the auspices of movie powerhouses like Shaw Brothers, Studio Merdeka and Cathay Keris. Almost all of the movies were meant for local screening. One movie genre, in particular, that is quite popular among Malay viewers is horror. In recent years, the Malay audience has been bombarded with an assortment of horror movies that vie with one another for attention; and this film genre definitely has its fair share of following. Horror films in the Malay tradition had a humble beginning with the screening of *Pontianak* (the Malay version of the female vampire) in 1957.

Since then it has spawned a great interest in the genre and local producers see the potential that horror movies have in drawing the crowd to the cinema and try to entertain them with gory scenes of death and mutilation, much like those movies produced in Hollywood and other western movie production houses. But unlike their western counterparts, horror movies in the Malay tradition are quite trite with tales of uncanny happenings, possession, exorcism by a holy preacher through the use of Quranic verses and the banishment of the evil entity to the other side of the divide, and all these can only be depicted if they do not transgress beyond the bounds set by the national censorship board or the *Lembaga Penapis Filem* (LPF). In short, Malay horror movies are to a certain extent very much objects of religious prescription meted out by the *Lembaga Penapis Filem* (LPF) which stipulates that whatever is deemed as *tahayul* or deviating from the true Islamic teachings in relation to the supernatural will be censored; any horror movie that flaunts this regulation will get the axe, as is the case of *Fantasia* (1992), a movie

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directed by Aziz M. Osman. The no *tahayul* stipulation by LPF very much sets the tone on what Malay horror movies, especially supernatural thriller, can and cannot depict, and this paper seeks to view its role as the sine qua non for Malay horror films and its structural effects on the Malay horror film industry. It will not give a lengthy discussion on what is considered *khurafat* or *tahayul* in Islam due to space limitation, suffice to say that there is such a restriction imposed on Malay horror movie production in Malaysia.

## 2. ELEMENTS OF HORROR AS A FILMIC GENRE

Horror, as a genre, started out in verbal form as myths and fables and then in printed form long before the invention of the cine camera made it possible for us to continuously project recognizable images across the big screen. According to Dixon (2010), the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa 2000 B.C) could be the precursor of the horror genre which presented a man-monster encounter where Gods could be cruel and ruled supreme over man's fate. Homer's *Odyssey* (circa 800 B.C) would also be considered as a precursor of modern-day horror with its depiction of human's terrifying encounter with horrifying creatures, again with Gods playing the roles of supreme beings who dictated the fate of mere mortals.

The first horror novel can be traced back to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Other works like Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), M.G. Lewis' *The Monk* (1795), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and John Polidori's *The Vampyre: A tale* (1819) and many more would follow suit before the genre would wend its way into Hollywood studios and assumed a more tangible, charismatic form. Tod Browning's *Dracula* and James Whale's *Frankenstein* came onto the silver screen in 1931 and the two movies initiated horror as a Hollywood genre (Spadoni, 2007). Horror in printed form preceded its visual counterpart by almost four centuries of gory entertainment. Today, modern cinematic technology has made it possible to depict horror to the minutest detail.

According to Kaay and Kaay (2016), horror as a filmic genre is the most widely produced type of movies on a yearly average and can be categorized into 75 sub-genres. They liken the sub-genres as the various beams of colours that make up the single solid white colour that we see with the naked eyes. The varied sub-genres are a sign of the popularity of horror as a filmic genre. Horror is popular because it affords us the pleasure of feeling the sensation of fear, anxiety and allows us a cathartic sense of release that comes with the realization that to be afraid is not horrible after all. Watching horror movies within the safe confines of the cinema or our home helps us come to terms with the real horror that exists in the outside world. It also compels us to question our belief in matters like violence, suffering and morality (Fahy, 2010). Stephen King (1981), the undisputed king of modern-day horror, says that horror movies are like "safety valve" that allows us to let the pressure that is concealed within us to be released and help us "dream awake" (xii). He adds that a good horror movie "functions on the symbolic level, using fictional (and sometimes supernatural) events "to make us comprehend our greatest fear" (xiii).

Francis, Jr. (2013) opines that Americans are very much susceptible to symbols such as flags, baseball caps, and the cross because these are loaded with "collective power" (p.37). Such objects when viewed as symbols can invoke feeling of dread or familiarity. He gives the example of Michael Myers' mask in *Halloween*. Myers' mask helps him blend in with the crowd on Halloween Night; in and by itself the mask is a harmless thing, but underneath it lies the face of a really sadistic killer. The mask becomes a symbol that stands for Michael Myers' persona and spirit as a killing machine par excellence. So, on Halloween Night when we see someone wearing Michael Myers' William Shatner mask we see in it a reflection of what lies behind the mask and the movie that makes it frightening. The mask and the movie have collectively become a symbol of death and dying, albeit in fictional form. Michael Myers' deed in the movie does not affect us

physically, but it does affect us deeply psychologically. The thought that someone like Michael Myers is able in this time and age to inflict great terror on others is deeply disturbing. But, the message from the movie is clear: it can happen to us no matter how careful we are.

Today's life is not short of modern-day legends to match yesteryears' folklores and myths. And they can even be more terrifying in terms of their graphic details of gores and sanguinary depiction of terrible death. Urban legends are stuff where things which we think of as true can have no real basis whatsoever (Harding, 2005). Harding, in his book, expounds on how we have come to accept certain events as true with the help of popular media and these events include UFO, alien abductions, and other supernatural happenings.

The latter is of special interest because supernatural event has a beginning that goes back many eons in time where the forces of evil were strong and defiant and religion was in the process of inchoately gaining a foothold on human's belief in spirituality. The supernatural can be looked at, in some instances, as the root cause of evil. Take the Amityville Horror as an example. In 1976, George Lutz and his wife Kathy bought a house on Ocean Avenue in Amityville, Long Island, knowing full well that a year prior to the purchase of the house, it had seen the murder of six of its occupants by the family's 23-year old son. Two weeks into the purchase and weird things began to happen which led to a series of investigations by both scientific and paranormal practitioners (Anson, 1977). Scientific investigations have shown that there is no evidence of any rational explanation for the strange happenings reported by the Lutzes. Reports by the Catholic Church are that the house is "possessed of some spirits beyond current human knowledge" (Anson, 1977, p.3). *The Blair Witch Project* is another good example of how the supernatural has had a hand in the disappearance of three young student filmmakers in the woods of Maryland (Stern, 1999). There is something about the supernatural that makes it appealing to us today because we are not able to rationally prove conclusively that there are things that go bump in the night that defy the rational mind. The supernatural has its place within the uncanny setting of urban legends.

And why are urban legends quite popular as a sub-genre of horror? According to Holt and Mooney (2004), we like them because the tales tell us a lot about who we are, our angst and anxieties and because they seem to be happening in the world today as we know it. They are not myths or folklores of yore where things seem so detached from the reality of today's life. Urban legends travel fast from one person to another like gossip, and we are enthralled by them. Another plausible answer is that we are living a life of comfort and shielded from real-life violence that there is a need for us to feel scared sometimes albeit through watching horror movies within the walls of our homes. As humans, it is only natural for us to seek pleasure in terrifying things; if not horror movies then a roller-coaster ride maybe, or parachute jumping. We are very much wired for life-threatening situations like how our ancestors were way back then when there was a need to hunt animals for food; the horror and the thrill of the hunt could be both life-threatening and fulfilling. Some died in the event but many others lived to tell the tale of the chase. We can have a modern mindset and live in a modern world but we are definitely creatures that inherit our ancestor's' genes and their deep-seated fear of the unknown when life was pitch dark and fraught with danger that was both real and imaginary. To some people, urban legends afford them a kind of pleasure-seeking experience that compels them to seek the truth by staying in a haunted house or go traipsing around an old, abandoned castle. Their adventure, in itself, is urban legend (Brunvand, 2001). These thrill-seekers sometimes inadvertently spice up their experience by adding a new twist to old rumours. Even those experts who try to prove the falsehood of an event might actually be creating a lot more sensation than the urban legend itself. And the mystery actually deepens with each statement of denial, especially when elements of religion or spirituality are involved.

Apart from the supernatural which adds an aura of mystery and suspense to urban legends and other horror thrillers, religion is yet another enigmatic but compelling element. The footprint of

religion in horror thrillers can be traced back especially to those movies that involve vampires and their overlord Count Dracula where the cross becomes one of the weapons of choice to deter them. According to Hallab (2009), vampires can be both real and supernatural. They are able to cross the line between the tangible world that we see with our naked eyes and the world that only the undead can go to. According to her, the popularity of the vampires in Western literature came about at a time when humans were experiencing ebb in their religious affinity due to the rise of modern science that caused us to have doubts about the existence of the afterlife. Something was needed to bring back human to believe in god. Religious relics and artefacts then became fashionable tools to fight the undead. In Western culture, with its predominant Christian affiliation, the cross became the amulet of choice for people to protect themselves against Count Dracula and other vampires. The cross, the platform upon which Jesus was crucified, becomes the symbol of everything that is good and divine, and thus a vicarious weapon of choice (Guiley, 2005).

Another element of Christianity which is frequently used in Western cinematic horror is exorcism, an elaborately painful ritual carried out by a trained priest only after permission is given by the Church. The rite is carried out as a last resort when a character in the movie, who is almost always female, is possessed by malevolent forces and is no longer able to be cured via conventional medicine or other psychiatric means. According to Olson and Reinhard (2017), such a story falls under the sub-genre of horror that they term "exorcism cinema" (p.1). Examples of such movies are *The Exorcist* (1973), *Abby* (1973), *Repossessed* (1990), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Unborn* (2009) and a host of other titles that carry elements of exorcism. According to them, *The Exorcist* has spawned interest in the use of exorcism in horror movies in other non-western cultures as well (p.2). In his book *A Christian response to Horror Cinema*, Fraser (2015) gives a truly illuminating advice to ward off evil, and that is to "stay away from the woods, especially late at night when unspeakable creatures come out and wait for naïve travellers. *Don't be foolish*" (p.190). If his advice is anything to go by, exorcism might not be needed in the first place. The assumption here is foolish people are the ones who get themselves in trouble when they should not be courting trouble in the first place. Religion cannot save you. And it is the duty of Evil to ensconce itself within the body and the mind of the foolish (Fraser, 2015). There is something eerie when Evil takes over the body but does not destroy it literally but use it to taunt those who try to exorcise it. The battle that ensues when the priest and his assistant confront Evil armed with the Bible and other religious artefacts can be very dramatic; if they lose who or what could stand in the way of Evil? Imagine a world where Evil and its underlings run rampant with no one to stop them from wreaking havoc on humankind.

In other parts of the world, where Christianity is not the predominant religion, exorcism is used quite heavily as the means to cast out evil in locally produced horror movies. Chinese, Indonesian, Thai and Malay horror movies are prone to utilizing exorcism as the main weapon of choice in destructing evil due to the profound religious belief of the indigenous population with the exception of Korean and Japanese movies where we seldom see priests and monks toiling hard to destroy evil. Barrett (1989) opines that Japanese ghosts are easier to pacify than their Western counterparts. Spirits that are difficult to pacify must have "come from the West" (p.116). According to Yi et al. (2010; as cited in Lee (2013)), "as with Japanese cinema, the representation of the vengeful Korean spirit relate to the complex cultural beliefs of the specific nation, in this case based on Shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and the newly introduced Christianity" (p.24). Zillman and Gibson (1996) contend that religion gives those who are rationally minded the view that there is a higher power other than science that needs to be acknowledged in order to defeat evil and create a sense of security (p. 27).

### 3. MALAY HORROR MOVIE INDUSTRY

The Malay horror movie industry has experienced a chequered history of many ups and downs. Azlina Asaari and Jamaluddin Aziz (2017) in their article succinctly describe the ebb and flow of the Malay horror movie industry from the time *Pontianak* was screened in 1957 right up to the present. *Pontianak* was the first Malay horror movie to be produced locally and was directed by B.N. Rao and was a box-office success (Mohd Nasif Badruddin, 2007). According to Hamzah Hussin (2004; as cited in Azlina Asaari & Jamaluddin Aziz (2017)), the film was dubbed into Cantonese and distributed in Hong Kong for screening the following year. In 1960, an American television station bought the film and it was shown in the program Asian Film Screen.

Subsequent to this, three other *Pontianak* movies *Dendam Pontianak* (1957), *Sumpah Pontianak* (1958) and *Anak Pontianak* (1958) were produced (M. Amin & Wahba, 1998; as cited in Azlina Asaari & Jamaluddin Aziz (2017)). In the 1950s a total of eight horror films were produced locally; among them were *Sumpahan Orang Minyak* (1958), *Orang Minyak* (1958), *Orang Licin* (1958), and *Hantu Kubur* (Abi 1987; as cited in Azlina Asaari & Jamaluddin Aziz (2017)). However, in 1960s and 1970s, the Malay horror film industry experienced a downward trend due to massive importation of foreign horror movies into the country, the advent of television and poor quality of production, both human and technical. In 1960s only five horror films were produced: *Hantu Rimau* (L. Krishnan 1960), *Mata Syaitan* (Husein Haniff 1962), *Pontianak Kembali* (B. N. Rao 1963), *Pontianak Gua Musang* (Ramon Estella 1964) and *Keranda Berdarah* (M. Amin 1969) (Abi, 1987; as cited in Azlina Asaari & Jamaluddin Aziz (2017)). In 1970s, only three horror films were produced: *Puaka* (1970), *Harimau Jadian* (1972) and *Pasung Puaka* (1979) (Azlina Asaari & Jamaluddin Aziz, 2017).

In 1980s, with the founding of FINAS (Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional), the Malay horror film industry tried to re-establish itself with the screening of eight movies: *Toyol* (1980), *Mangsa* (1981), *Perjanjian Syaitan* (1981), *Setinggalan* (1982), *Dendam Dari Pusara* (1983), *Ilmu Saka* (1984), *Rahsia* (1987) and *Perawan Malam* (1988). According to Azlina Asaari and Jamaluddin Aziz (2017), these movies incorporated religious elements in order to elevate the teaching of Islam. We can surmise somewhat that it was an era where the nation was witnessing a rekindling of religious fervour among its young Malay generations. Anything that directly or remotely portrays the concept of *tahayul*, loosely defined as something that deviates from the teaching of Islam in relation to the supernatural will be axed. The 8 aforementioned movies have elements of the supernatural where strange uncanny things happen but this is something that is acceptable in the Malay-Muslim psyche where it is believed that this ephemeral world is not only home to human but also home to the djinns as well. This is not considered *tahayul*. The world of Man and the unseen creatures are all intertwined in this ephemeral world and the constant interplay between good and evil is just part of ordinary life as the Malay-Muslim community sees it. In the tenets of Islam, apart from the world of man, other supernatural beings also have claimed to this world as their place of dominion. This is acceptable in Islam. The Quran and hadith of the Prophet Muhammad contain a reference to this phenomenon. To deny this means to deny one's faith in the six pillars of Islam, one of which is to believe in the existence of the noumenal (Clark, 2003; Muhammad, 2011). Strange things do happen but they happen because God wills it so. It depicts the omnipotence nature of god. One good example of religious prescription in horror films in the Malay tradition is that in the opening scene of some Malay supernatural thrillers we see the use of Quranic verses that remind the audience that everything that happens in this world is by the grace of Allah. It is to Him that we seek protection from all that is evil and sacrilegious. Strange things do happen and they are not considered *tahayul*. Instances of *tahayul* might be a scene where the dead has come back to life or where the protagonist has a love affair with someone from the spirit world.

But in 1990s, by strictly enforcing the said criterion of no *tahayul*, the Malay horror movie industry suffered a nosedive with only two movies produced, *Main-Main Hantu* (1990) and

*Fantasia* (1992), but the latter was banned by LPF from being screened because it was deemed to have violated the criteria set down by the regulating body (Razdan Mazlan 2009; as cited in Azlina Asaari & Jamaluddin Aziz (2017)). In an interview with Aziz M. Osman in August 2014, Azlina Asaari and Jamaluddin Aziz (2017) were told that LPF did not allow directors to show any scene where the dead has come back to life unless it is in a dream-like state. If not it would be considered *tahayul*.

The Malay horror movie industry suffered an eclipse because producers feared that after much money and effort had gone into producing a horror movie it might get the axe because the censorship was too austere. But, in the next decade, when LPF decided to loosen up a bit by asking producers to consult with them first before shooting a scene that could be considered as *tahayul* did the Malay horror movie industry began to reassert itself with a series of box-office movies: *I Know What You Did Last Raya*, *Tujuh Perhentian*, *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, and *Di Ambang Misteri*. The formula is simple: consult LPF first before shooting a scene to ensure that you do not transgress. For example, the film *Tujuh Perhentian* nearly got the axe from LPF because there was a complaint by Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) that it was not permissible to have a movie that depicts love interest between human and a spirit entity. The script had to be reworked and it was only after this was done LPF allowed the movie to be screened (*Tujuh Perhentian n.d*). This is another example of religious prescription at work. Producers have learnt to toe the line by consulting LPF first when working with something that can be deemed as *tahayul*, and by during this a total of 95 horror movies have been produced locally during this new century so far and more are definitely in the pipeline (FINAS 2014; as cited in Azlina Asaari & Jamaluddin Aziz (2017)).

Earnings at the box-office have seen an upward trend with the tacit *consult-first-and-then-shoot* agreement between producers and the censorship board apropos the issue of *tahayul* as can be seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Year and box-office collection of Malay horror movies

Year	Collection (in million of RM)
2005	217
2006	235
2007	289
2008	381
2009	403
2010	518
2011	602
2012	608
2013	692

**Source:** Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Malaysia; as cited in Hani Salwah Yaakup, Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud & Mohd Shahizan Ali (2016)

As we can see, the “*noble*” intention by LPF to set a strict code on religious issues apropos Malay horror movie is commendable but it is a double-edged sword that could cut deep into the purse of movie producers if there was evidence of *tahayul*. With some degree of relaxation by LPF on its censorship rules the Malay horror movie industry began to flourish. However, the fact remains that Malay horror movies, especially supernatural thrillers, are to some extent a form of religious prescription as per the regulation set by LPF on the issue of *tahayul* and the use of religious elements that seek to elevate the teaching of Islam. If producers are unsure on a particular scene then they should be wise enough to get the necessary advice, or “prescription”, from LPF who might sometimes be advised by other religious bodies such as the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

With the advancement in today's cinematic technology, horror movies worldwide have an almost unbridled power to create fantastic images of things that we thought were not possible before. What it takes are good directing and superb acting skills to make a horrific scene come to life to scare viewers so much so that they are willing to part with their hard-earned money at the box-office. The Malay horror movie industry also has the same universal motives to scare people and make as much money as possible from them but with one condition: no *tahayul*. From a humble beginning, with the screening of Pontianak in 1957, the industry has experienced a roller coaster ride in terms of production and box-office collection, due mainly to LPF's strict imposition of the no *tahayul* policy and its raison d'être of elevating the teaching of Islam way back in the 1980s, which saw the industry almost coming to its death throes in the ensuing decade. But with the relaxation somewhat on the issue of *tahayul* the industry has since begun an upward trend. But as we can extrapolate from the preceding paragraphs, due to LPF's imposition of the no *tahayul* criterion, the role of religion in Malay horror movies, especially with supernatural thriller in the Malay tradition, is indispensable and will always remain so in the near future. But if the trend in sales collection at the box-office is anything to go by then we can safely assume that the Malay audiences do not see it as anathema to them. The Malay audience perhaps are those whom Zillman and Gibson (1996) describe as ones who see religion as something that gives them the sense that there is a higher power other than science that needs to be acknowledged in order to defeat evil and create a sense of security (p. 27).

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