

In comparing feminine supernatural horror to *film laga*, I contend that women in the former are positioned as better able to carry over magical, superhuman abilities and deploy them as disturbing, but ultimately much-needed, interventions in the present, especially during the New Order. As noted above, it appears that the somewhat heavier weighting on a dualist feminine power operative in the present is a calculated or reflexive response to the political makeup and needs of Indonesia under Soeharto. Films, like ritual sites, deftly juggle Islam, modern legal authority, prostitution, desire, legendary romance, and the potential for illicit or radical alliances between men and women, humans and ghosts, and at times partners of the same sex or gender. They assert that in most cases, it is a male partner who needs to be coaxed by a spirit to better understand and engage with the world as it “really” is. But the idea that things could be the other way around also continues to circulate in media and spiritual practice.

As in the films of the 1950s and 1960s analyzed in earlier chapters, the particular cinematic perspective that expands on the political economy of rituals is also contested along class lines. Especially in the case of 1980s supernatural horror and *film laga*, locally made films were frowned on as lowbrow embarrassments by elite critics (Imanjaya 2014; Sasono 2014). But like hybrid, and in some sense sordid, “Islamic” rituals that conjure Tantric and other “fragments” of the past through sex and prostitution, supernatural horror and action films were able to create strong economic bases that helped ensure the longevity of their messages. Two of the most iconic stars of these films, the above-mentioned Suzzanna and Barry Prima, were among the highest paid actors in Indonesian cinema at the time. The special effects used in many films, while not precisely in line with the global state of the art, were also often elaborate and visually impressive, as well as expensive. One might think of the imagery created with such effects (including hyperrealistic makeup and explosions, maggots crawling on rotting flesh, and flying heads and entrails, among others) as complex, cinematic “national icons” that connect and build on the similarly ubiquitous—and ambiguous, deconstructive—status of enduring figures like Ratu Kidul.

A REGIONAL PANTHEON OF NATIONAL-POLITICAL PHANTOMS AND SPIRIT DOUBLES

Indonesia is of course far from the only Southeast Asian country in which the transdiegetic, intermedial appearance of the supernatural is effective as a disruptor of modern conceptions such as absolute patriarchy and linear, future-oriented national time. Gazing at mythical-historical supernatural figures that transcend the space and time of the nation, audiences are also positioned to imagine connections across patchy bodies of *tanah air* (land-water) into other regional territories where similar politically, economically, and socially formative apparitions are known to appear. As Rosalind Galt argues, neighboring female spirits like the Malay *pontianak* have since at least the 1950s similarly thrown time “out of joint”

(2021:9) in ways that make nationalist elites uncomfortable or worse. As the various manifestations of the sundel bolong in the film *Sundelbolong* also begin to demonstrate, the experience of spiritual-cinematic disruption is eminently regional.

At certain moments in the narrative, Suzzanna's character shifts her appearance in ways that gesture toward both a supernatural and a supranational pantheon. Her most common appearance is still the Indonesia-specific one that fits the general description of a sundel bolong: a deathly pale-faced, yet potentially attractive woman with dark circles around her eyes and long, black hair that covers (and can move to strategically reveal) a bloody, maggot-filled hole in her back. At other times, however, her head turns into a skull that detaches from her body and flies around with its entrails still attached and dragging below. In this form, she more closely resembles the Indonesian and Malay *penanggalan*, the Thai *phi krasue*, the Filipino *manananggal*, and the Cambodian *arb*. All of these are female (although the krasue has a male manifestation) and have heads that leave their lower bodies behind, flying around with guts, lungs, and/or spinal cords in tow (occasionally the organs take on the appearance of tentacles).

Each of these feminine phantoms attack by biting or sucking blood, other bodily fluids, or viscera, often targeting pregnant women and fetuses. A complexly feminist aspect similar to what is described above can also be seen to emerge from this group of characters. For Galt, their obsessive "baby-eating . . . promises to reverse ideas of proper womanhood" (Galt 2026:7). Such ghosts also take revenge or fight for the rights of women victimized by the overextension of patriarchal power and desire, which in most cases is directly or implicitly associated with narrow-minded nationalism. In several other scenes in *Sundelbolong*, the eponymous spirit also hides in the branches of trees above her victims' heads and lets out a high-pitched, demonic laugh that startles and terrifies. This associates her with the known tactics of the *kuntilanak* (Indonesia), *pontianak* (Malaysia), the Thai *phi mae maai* (including the famous *nang Nak*, about which more below) and the Filipino *tianak*: a further set of predatory feminine ghosts whose names resemble each other and whose similar manifestations are likewise triggered by deadly patriarchal violence, especially involving women who are pregnant—focusing on their unique powers of life-giving.

Following the general cultural guidelines attached to the *kuntilanak*, the *pontianak*, and related regional forms, one of the male victims in *Sundelbolong* also attempts to tame Alisa's manifestation by inserting a nail into her head (elsewhere it is often placed in the back of the neck). He claims this will turn her into a beautiful, human woman until the nail is removed again, repeating another typical aspect of this particular set of ghosts throughout the region (see, e.g., Galt 2021; Izharuddin 2020). In this case, however, the sundel bolong-cum-kuntilanak scares him so badly that he is unable to insert the (very phallic) nail, and when he tries to run away, he is killed. In scenes like this, *Sundelbolong* works by marshaling regional understandings and representations (cinematic and otherwise) of the

supernatural and the spiritual. These are integrated into the film's deconstruction of the New Order's national political identity by reaching beyond imposed borders that do not contain or limit the identities of spirits. In light of films like *Bangunnya Nyi Roro Kidul*, *Sundelbolong*, and others, I argue that ghosts are positioned alternately as a subnational (Javanese, for example) or supranational (Southeast Asian) "resource" that can be called on to intervene when certain kinds of problems arise on local and national levels.

Galt (2026) sees the function of regional penanggalan-centered films in a similar way, arguing that they "do significant work in creating national cinematic identities," while bringing out "the ideological complexity of the local as a form of cultural meaning" (2–3). Galt's study focuses on a range of examples in which the appearance of penanggalan, krasue, or arb on the screen mark important supranational moments such as the end of the communist Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, while also reasserting more localized claims, such as a specifically Balinese identity in Indonesia. Penanggalan films may also intervene, Galt argues, in the national as such, as in movies that focus on the dominant ethnic discourses of Thai history. As we have seen, in their Indonesian evocation of the endurance of older, polytheistic or animist beliefs and practices, regional supernatural films also work to disrupt elite attempts at shoring up and claiming narrowly defined ethnic, national, and religious identities.

As Galt argues elsewhere, the wild popularity of the pontianak as a historically embedded, traditionally Malay onscreen figure also accorded her the status of a national icon, not unlike Ratu Kidul in Indonesia. But because of historical differences in the development of the two nations, the effect of this iconicity was reversed in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the pontianak became a more hotly contested figure, culturally claimed but officially disavowed by both Malaysia and Singapore as each sought to define themselves along racially divided lines toward the end of their joint cinematic golden age in the 1950s and early 1960s (Galt 2021:5). As we saw in chapter 3, the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 caused decades of cinematic "blindness" as both countries halted or severely reduced film production. Thereafter, the pontianak, whose films had helped to expand local cinemas during the golden age, was positioned as a cursed icon that had previously united and been claimed by both of the estranged neighbors now permanently separated by bitter ethnic divisions. Even when media industries began to recover, such was the negative cultural-political aura of the pontianak and other figures like her that the supernatural was almost completely absent from Malaysian and Singaporean screens until the early twenty-first century. Even now, without the unifying power of the pontianak and the expanded cinematic purview, audiences and industry she helped build in the past, Malay and Chinese-Singaporean cinemas have never quite been the same.

In Thailand, the intermedial and ritual spread of the legend of nang Nak Phra Khanong similarly transformed a *phi mae maai* (a Thai widow ghost most similar to the pontianak) into yet another complex national icon (Knee 2014:220)—one



FIGURE 33. Poster for the 1959 version of the Thai film *Mae Nak Phra Khanong*. Courtesy of the Thai Film Archive.

that has never been banned but that is also understood as a “murderous . . . yet . . . motherly goddess” and an empowering “female archetype” (Wong 2000:124, 129) in the face of Theravada Buddhist-infused Thai patriarchy. The narrative specific to nang Nak (sometimes called *mae* Nak or spelled Naak) is thought to have originated during the reign of King Rama IV (1851–68), although it has also been associated with the previous century (Wong 2000:125). Debuting as one of the first-ever Thai sound films in the 1930s (Guelden 1995:79), the story of *Nang Nak Phra Khanong*, often also called *Mae Nak Phra Khanong*, has been filmed more than twenty times, remade continuously through the 16 mm live-dubbed era (1940–70) and ushered into the streaming present (fig. 33).

Before becoming a film, *Nang Nak* was also performed as *likay*, the early twentieth-century Thai vernacular theater that most heavily influenced the style

and form of postwar popular movies (see chapter 2). Similar to how Galt (2021) positions the pontianak in Malaya, then, *Nang Nak* (both as narrative and as ghostly figure) can be said to have played a fundamental role in the formulation of what was to become Thai “classical” cinema. The legend has also been adapted for radio and television and published in written form numerous times, including as a series of comics (Wong 2000:124). Mirroring the ritual sites dedicated to other iconic regional spirits, at the edge of the Wat Mahabute temple complex in Bangkok, on the site of what is believed to be Nak’s grave, there is also a well-attended shrine to nang Nak. Pilgrims, including foreign and domestic tourists, pray there for success and luck, offering money, incense, flowers, and other compensation in return.

As in Parangkusumo and Gunung Kemukus in Java, the nang Nak shrine generates significant income for the local community and temple. For Ka F. Wong, the social, economic, and political activities surrounding the site are key factors in how Nak “has . . . transformed herself from a killing corpse to a revered ‘deity’” (2000:127). Between the shrine and ongoing media adaptations (the latest of which is a Netflix series entitled *Nak* [dir. Nitivat Cholvaniichsiri 2023]), Nak is arguably always both a “killing corpse,” whose ever-immanent return, like the pontianak and others, is used by mothers to scare children, and an ancient goddess whose awakenings respond to and broaden the scope of local- and national-level debates and crises. Like the Hindu origins associated with Indonesian icon Ratu Kidul, for Wong, Nak as deity most closely “accords with Durga or Kali, whose sublime manifestations always come with a dark noisome side” (131). Nak is also frequently associated with *Mae Posop*, an ancient rice spirit similar to the Javanese Dewi Sri, and a serpentine fertility goddess known as a *naga*, or dragon (the word and goddess are generally the same in Indonesia and Malaysia), which Wong suggests may be the etymological root of the current moniker Nak/Naak (134).

In this capacity, Nak works to blend official Thai Theravada Buddhist religious practice with older belief systems that continue to circulate throughout the region, troubling the modern, patriarchal values attached to religion by the state. Like the narratives and ritual sites that commemorate Ratu Kidul and other deities and spirits, who are in turn further disseminated by films like *Sundelbolong*, the legend and worship of nang Nak Phra Khanong is also entangled with the idea of an originary “power couple”—the dual figures that I position as basic poles of a broader symbolic order encompassing different sexes, and potentially multiple genders, without excluding one or the other. In this case as well, more contemporary versions of the narrative show the female partner as the one who is better able to embody elements of either side.

Arnika Fuhrmann (2009) also highlights aspects of the nang Nak narrative that suggest an ability to grow, multiply, and intervene based on a formative partnership between ghost and human lover. At the end of most cinematic and other versions of *Nang Nak Phra Khanong*, a heroic and supernaturally gifted monk (the regional parallel, I argue, of the Indonesian *kiai ex machina*) finally subdues

the ghostly Nak, and she agrees to halt her haunting of the village for good. Despite her seeming defeat, for Fuhrmann, the message impressed on Mak, her husband in life and death, and on viewers is not that of acquiescence to official Buddhist patriarchy. Instead, film versions' continual focus on the couple's longing glances conveys a woman's "protest against the ways in which trajectories of desire have been scripted for" her and others like her in nationalist-religious discourse (Fuhrmann 2009:241). As the final images and voice-over in the 1999 iteration make clear, Mak's experiences with Nak are something he will always carry with him, embedded by his undying love for his wife, even after she has died, become a ghost, and vanished into another realm. Through the transmortal agency of his wife, Mak has become a human "vessel" for Nak's spirit and subversive desires.

Because Nak is a deity and spiritual type, however, and not simply the ghost of a dead man's wife, I suggest that Mak's body and soul alone are implied to be insufficient as an archive for all that she represents. Like her real-life shrine grafted permanently onto a mainstream temple, filmic Nak must take on the more rigid and conservative Thai Buddhist institution represented by the powerful monk who subdued her. In a scene highly evocative of the taming of Indonesian and Malay *pontianak* by hammering a nail into the back of their neck, but with a different outcome, the monk *ex machina*'s assistant uses a hammer and spike to remove a circular fragment from the skull of Nak's now-stilled corpse. Echoing other versions of the narrative where her ghost is trapped by the monk in a ceramic pot, the piece of skull is said to imprison or "contain" Nak. Yet the fragment is not destroyed or disposed of. Instead it is made into a talisman that is worn by the monk. Like Mak, he will carry her with him wherever he goes, becoming her more public vessel or medium of transmission.

For Wong, the skull talisman symbolizes that "Buddhism has recognized the goddess belief," which becomes "rooted in the collective psyche of the Thai people" (2000:135). In the end, Nak's self-sacrificing acquiescence to the demands of the monk deploys Thai Buddhism to do something that it is generally seen as frowning on: internalizing and reproducing a pre-Buddhist, premodern deity with an enduringly radical spiritual, economic, and political influence on modern national identity. Fuhrmann (2016) terms the pleasurable mode of human-spirit contemplation and yearning that makes this possible a subversive, vernacular "Buddhist sexual contemporaneity." It is a space that connects and accommodates beings from different places and times and is not unlike an archipelago, a database, or the "horizontal" convergence of old and new media that I have shown to occur throughout the region's cinematic history. In this case, Fuhrmann connects the term specifically to the conglomeration of media, religion, and spirit beliefs that arose in early twenty-first century Thailand. But I argue that it resonates with earlier periods in modern Thai history from which similarly disruptive versions of *Nang Nak Phra Khanong* and its illicit human-ghost connections emerged.¹⁶

Looking at the occurrence of this transsexual, -temporal, and -spiritual contemporaneity as not limited to the modern present would seem to better align with its politics of connecting disparate bodies, minds, and epistemologies. Doing so also links Buddhist sexual contemporaneity to other power couplings based on comparable narratives, sites, and practices in other locales throughout the region. As we have seen in numerous films and ritual examples so far, whether in the context of “vernacular, quotidian, and frequently . . . nondoctrinal” Thai Buddhism (Fuhrmann 2016:16), Malay or other animisms, Filipino Catholicisms, or Javanized Islam, different categories of beings are continually represented or embodied as radically, powerfully occupying the same space and time. This amalgam can include ghosts and humans but also possibly illicit male and female or queer couplings. In each context, the result is arguably to open “an idiom of counterfactual possibility” where “counternormative or as yet impossible desires” are willed into being (Fuhrmann 2016:13). To this I would add pre-, post-, or counternational desires and the caveat that whether having a relationship with a ghost is abnormal or “counterfactual” often depends on the specific details of an individual’s or group’s class and religious alliances (think, for example, of the sultan of Yogyakarta’s eternal, culturally sanctioned relationship with Ratu Kidul).

Like other regional supernatural fare, as Thai ghost films bring older practices and spirits of the deceased to life, they often present official patriarchal values as deadly, especially for women. To frustrate the mortal force of masculine power, films thus “write complex plots for female death, desire, and the nature of collective sentiment in this realm” (Fuhrmann 2009:233). The repetition of such complex plots across films makes the deaths of women onscreen into a convention that, as I have noted in the case of Indonesian supernatural film, opens onto other spaces and times where the potential for justice is greater than under a national-patriarchal legal system. In avoiding “real” protections and at times embracing the end of human life, Fuhrmann suggests, supernatural films’ interventions into the politics of spirituality and gender in Thailand often contravene more positivist-activist concepts and methods of transnational liberal and feminist thought—an idea that resonates with the messy, melodramatic radicalism of most supernatural horror films and with the complicated conditions under which places like Parangkusumo are run. For each, the conglomeration of economic, social, and spiritual attractions, transactions, and points of reference makes for multifarious experiences and potential interpretations. These include the inevitable, if rarely dominant, “male gaze” deployed by films in certain scenes; they also encompass pilgrims, like the man I described earlier, who seem mostly interested in hiring a prostitute.

Whatever drives attendees to such events, however, I have shown that they are subjected to a spiritual-ideological apparatus that centers on a female symbolic, sociosexual, political, and economic power around which other cultural, historical, and aesthetic fragments—including Tantric ones—revolve. Via her various human stand-ins, the plurally iconic and transdiegetic Ratu Kidul also shuttles

between the positions of subject and object and masculine and feminine as she exchanges glances and knowledge with her devotees and potential lovers. On one hand, she demonstrates that one cannot always simply have what one wants and that desire will not be fulfilled as such. On the other hand, her words, acts, and looks impress on humans that they may grow through persistence in their respect and longing (including in the form of ritual worship) for something or someone that may offer what is almost as good: the ability to perceive time and agency—and overdetermined differences like gender—as less subject to the homogenizing limits and conventions traditionally imposed by modernist national patriarchies. I argue that the enduring allure of this skill, and the political perspective embedded in it, is what most profoundly connects the region's feminine cinematic icons.

CANNY REGIONAL GHOSTS, ENDURING ARCHIPELAGIC CINEMAS

I will conclude this chapter by circling back to where I began, returning to the Philippines and to the idea of a dual symbolic order. Filipino cineaste Lambreto Avellana is responsible for what appears to be the region's first supernatural horror film, the 1926 *Manananggal*, titled after the vampiric female spirit of the same name. Like elsewhere in the region, but on a slightly different timeline, a now familiar, enduring pattern of mass media-driven threats to the sanctity of nationalist modernity quickly ensued. This includes not only countless films, but, as Bliss Cua Lim reports (2009), viscera-sucking manananggal that leapt from the ostensibly fictional worlds of screens, literature, and legends to appear in Filipino newspapers in the 1990s. Even more than in the movies, for Lim, the appearance of ghosts in such a modern and ostensibly fact-based medium positioned the phantoms on par with other typical news items like elections, government pronouncements, or power outages (2009:120). The collective sense of “current events” that are otherwise understood (especially when presented via newspapers or television news) to occur simultaneously along the regularized, chronological flow of modern national time was therefore subjected to spectral disruptions emanating from the regional past (Lim 2009:142).

Within the very same mass medium that Benedict Anderson (1983) positioned as the basis of Southeast Asian nations as “imagined communities” experienced in chronological, calendrical “homogeneous empty time,” readers were instead confronted with an “unwieldy, occult splitting of the national time, a *heterogeneous meanwhile*” (Lim 2009:126, emphasis in original)—a time-space that I argue recalls Fuhrmann's Buddhist contemporaneity, as well as other related regional concepts. Outside the Philippines, since at least the 1950s, pontianak and *punakawan* (ambiguously gendered servant-gods from the annals of Javanese *wayang*) have also made regular appearances in the pages of weekly and daily national news (see Galt 2021:236; and Hermanu 2010:198). Yet for Lim, even when they are faithfully