Kuntilanak

Ghost Narratives and Malay Modernity in Pontianak, Indonesia

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Abstract

Kuntilanak is an icon of pop culture well known in several nations in Southeast Asia. While the female vampire is the subject of horror films and novels, people in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, claim that the city was founded by evicting Kuntilanak, who inhabited the confluence of the Kapuas and Landak rivers before the city was built. This article examines narratives on Kuntilanak, comparing it with other spirit perceptions found among Dayak in West Kalimantan. It suggests that the horror of that terrifying ghost is the price people had to pay for conceptualizing nature in accordance with Islamic Malay modernity. Referring to Critical Theory approaches, it is argued that the hostility and horror of Kuntilanak are expressions of a specific mode of enlightenment in the widest sense of the term, that is, an effort to conceptualize nature in order to rule over it. Nature thus emerges in opposition to the civilized, Muslim societies (*masyarakat madani*) of Malay coastal towns.

Keywords

Kalimantan – Pontianak – animism – Kuntilanak – Malay – Dayak

1 Introduction

In the course of what has become known as the ontological turn in cultural anthropology, human–nature relations with regard to spirits have become a widely discussed topic in social anthropology in recent years (Holbraad and Pederson 2017). In new studies of animism, human–spirit relations are not regarded as remnants of the past, as was the case in evolutionist anthropology, but as expressions of other epistemologies (Bird-David 1999) or even distinct

or conflicting ontologies (for instance, Blaser 2013; Vivieros de Castro 2012; Descola 2013). Not surprisingly, human–spirit relations also became an issue for anthropologists doing research on Southeast Asia (for instance, Århem and Sprenger 2016; Sprenger and Großmann 2018). Those recent works on animism and spirits in Southeast Asia mainly focus on rural areas. Spirits and ghosts, however, are phenomena common also in urban environments in Southeast Asia (for instance, Johnson 2014; Hüwelmeier 2018). For a considerable part of the urban population in countries like Malaysia or Indonesia, spirits actually exist and stories about spirits are a part of commonly shared social knowledge.

This article deals with the ghost of Kuntilanak/Pontianak, a kind of vampire that not only haunts the collective memory of people in the Malay realm but also plays an important role for the urban site of Pontianak (the capital of West Kalimantan province in Indonesia) as both a haunting, terrifying, and absent evicted spirit. As I will argue, narrations on Kuntilanak are both myths and modes of ‘enlightenment in the widest sense’, that is, as ‘the advance of thought’ that aims ‘at liberating humans and installing them as masters’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:1). Narratives of Kuntilanak are constitutive for the self-conception of modern Malayness as a civilized Islamic identity, as a *masyarakat madani* (on this term, see Alatas 2010:173). As such, this concept contrasts with the wild and terrifying nature of the interior of Borneo. It is not only a self-concept of Malayness in Pontianak but of modern, advanced societies in the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore in general. However, I demonstrate in the following that this self-perception comes at a price, since Kuntilanak embodies and maintains a traumatic dimension of the societies’ other. By drawing on Critical Theory, I suggest an approach rather different from the ‘ontological’ approaches mentioned above and common to most recent contributions on human–spirit relations. When dealing with a modern society and modern narratives, factors such as religion and animism must not be regarded as the opposite or the other of modernity or modern/Western ontology. Rather, they are part of a specific form of modernity that encompasses both enchantment and disenchantment: instead of disenchantment, as proposed for Western modernity (Cascardi 1992:16–40), Malay modernity and enlightenment (again, in the widest sense of the term) disenchant and distances the ‘self’ (the urban, advanced *masyarakat madani*) from the horror by enchanting and creating otherness (forest, nature, and Kuntilanak as the other in a human form).

Before providing a brief overview of Kuntilanak narratives, the article deals with the concept of enlightenment as developed by early Critical Theory as the theoretical framework for the analysis. In the following, I will present three

different types of narratives: Kuntilanak narratives in popular culture, as depicted in horror novels and films; Malay folk stories; and the founding myth of the city. The main argument of the article is mainly based on the latter narrative, but all these narratives are intertwined, since they are based on similar constitutive units (for instance, motives of nature as the source of horror and the alien). The narratives differ to a certain degree since ghost stories in popular culture in Indonesia are often influenced by Western ghost and monster narratives. In the case of Kuntilanak, it is obvious that Western perceptions of the vampire play a certain role here. However, the perception of Kuntilanak as a ghost that drinks blood is not merely a Western one. Rather, it makes local narratives relatable to global narratives. On the other hand, the article argues that specific local narratives on Kuntilanak, especially with regard to nature, have found their way into popular culture, too.

The Kuntilanak narratives mentioned in the following are to a large extent based on stories collected during a six-month fieldwork trip in 2014. During frequent visits to Pontianak in the following years, I was able to gain even deeper insights into the ghost narratives present in the city. My original fieldwork was concerned with animist narratives of Dayak activists and Dayak living in villages in West Kalimantan. Although Dayak activists and most people in Dayak villages are officially Catholics, many also maintain animist worldviews and do not perceive Catholicism and animism as in contradiction with each other. It is different when it comes to Protestant Dayak, as they tend to abandon animist rituals. Since the Dayak activists were based in the urban environment of Pontianak, I became also familiar with Malay narratives on spirits, most of all on Kuntilanak. When confronting Malay friends with spirit narratives from Dayak activists and people in Dayak villages, they often told their Malay stories about spirits. Additionally, I talked with Malay people in the traditional Malay settlements near the Kapuas River (Kampung Bangka, south of the centre, and the area where the sultan's palace, Istana Kadriyah, and the Masjid Jami, the town's first mosque, are located). It is an area inhabited mostly by people from the lower middle class. People often live there for many generations and usually have strong bonds with the sultan family as the main source of their Pontianak Malay identity. They usually know well the folk stories and narratives of their city. I also had the chance to meet with local cultural experts (*budayawan*) from both Malay and Dayak backgrounds, who told me a lot about spirits in West Kalimantan. Kuntilanak was often mentioned and my Malay informants also pointed out some similarities between Dayak narratives on spirits and their Malay counterparts. This article outlines these narratives and investigates some similarities, suggesting that both Dayak and Malay narratives relay on concepts of place-bound spirits and human-spirit relations.

Additionally, I collected other material on the ghost, such as its depiction in books and films. I also discussed horror films about Kuntilanak with many of my Indonesian friends. My aim was to identify similar motives within the distinct narrative types. Whereas the local narratives consist of the founding myth of the city as well as of local folk stories about Kuntilanak, narratives in popular culture in Indonesia are often also influenced by Western perceptions of ghosts and monsters (on this process, see also Bubandt 2012:10). However, local narratives also play crucial roles in these popularized narratives. This article focuses mainly on the analysis of the myth of Kuntilanak as narrated in Pontianak, within the contexts of the dichotomies that the narratives derive from and in regard to other spirit conceptions in West Kalimantan, namely those of the Dayak communities. Additionally, I refer to narratives I encountered in popular culture in order to illustrate that certain motives in Kuntilanak narratives are widespread. However, these motives are derived from local narratives and depict the construction of nature as the 'other' of the safe, civilized realm. My aim is to conduct an analysis of discourses, analysing a variety of discursive forms about Kuntilanak and identifying similar constitutive units within the distinct narratives. Finally, the article provides an analysis based on arguments drawn from the *Dialectics of enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), a key text of the Critical Theory.

2 'Enlightenment in the Widest Sense of the Term' and Modernity

Critical Theory, as developed by the early Frankfurt School, originates from a critique of reason in a double sense: reason is a mode of critique as well as a tool for projects of emancipation, a way of overcoming prevailing conditions dominated by nature. On the other hand, reason is an object of critique insofar as reason, in the sense of rationality, progress, science, disenchantment, and technology, emerges as a purpose of its own. With European history in mind, Critical Theory abolishes the optimism of progress while aiming to keep alive the possibility of another, reconciled society—even though that aim is delayed for an indefinite time. Rather than using it to create a just society, progress has been used to exercise domination. Fascism, the cultural industry, and Stalinism have contributed to a much more pessimistic and yet critical approach towards human progress in history. Reason, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, is humankind's latest tool for conceptualizing the world in a way that allows human beings to overcome the fear that nature had imposed on them: 'the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:2). In their view, myths are early forms

of enlightenment since they provide explanations of nature in order to enable humans to interact with nature in a way that minimizes its danger: nature becomes controllable through myths, or at least people believe that nature can be affected through rituals.

In the case of Western history, advancing rationality has destroyed what Adorno termed 'early forms of enlightenment', such as animism and myths (Lijster 2015:158–9). On the other hand, rationality as a purpose in and of itself contains a mystical dimension, since it fetishizes progress. However, in the case of non-Western societies, rationality, religion and other early forms of enlightenment are still intertwined to a much higher degree today. This means that secularization and disenchantment are not processes that are necessarily inherent in modern societies. Increased control over, and domination of, nature, wage labour, division of labour, capitalism in general, and other features of modern societies do not depend on the disenchantment of the world. As Eisenstadt (1973) argued in his early work, modernity is a process in which tradition (and, with it, 'early forms of enlightenment') does not simply fade away but is constantly reinterpreted within changing contexts.

However, general features of 'enlightenment in the widest sense of the term' can be elaborated and applied to an analysis of different modernities, for instance, the idea of a dialectical process between myth and rationality: there is rationality in animism, expressed in the doubling of nature into object (matter) and subject (spirit), thus enabling humans to rule over nature through interaction with the spirit dimension. The argument that animism is a mode of ruling over nature seems to be at odds with the current interpretations prevalent in New Animism theories, which instead conceptualize animism as a way of more horizontally relating to the non-human environment. What I call 'New Animism' represents the current paradigm in animism studies, which deals with animism as a distinct epistemology or ontology.¹ Despite their differences, definitions of New Animism have something in common, namely, the view that animism is essentially distinct from modern, Western, or naturalist notions of making sense of the world. Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, embark from a Marxist perspective that stresses the need to organize metabolic relations with nature. Humans, thus, aim to achieve control of the non-human environment, since they aim to ensure their biological needs and reduce the fear that nature imposes on them. Animism, in this view, provides a cognitive means to achieve a certain amount of control over nature: by maintaining a relationship with spirits, people can control them to a certain degree. Anim-

1 See, for instance, Bird-David 1999; Blaser 2013, Vivieros de Castro 2012; Descola 2013.

ists have already established forms of rule over nature. The animated nature thus expresses a form of subject-object distinction which derives from what Horkheimer and Adorno call the preponderance of nature over men. In their words (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:10–1), animism is not a ‘projection but the echo of the real preponderance of nature [...]’. The split between animate and inanimate, the assigning of demons and deities to certain specific places, arises from this preanimism. By assigning intentionality and sociality to certain entities in nature, the preponderance of the natural environment can be addressed. However, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that animism is not an effective tool for overcoming the fear and horror of the struggle with the natural environment, since these spirits are an expression of the uncertainties of nature itself. Rather than suggesting that animism depicts a harmonious relationship between men and nature, the *Dialectics of enlightenment* argues that fear has a place within the animated world. On the other hand, Horkheimer and Adorno stress that animism does not subordinate nature through the principle of identification between concepts/ideas and the object. Instead, animism refers to the idea of *mimesis*: the shaman and the spirit become alike in order for the shaman to engage with the spirit (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:6). Animism has the same aim as rationality, but the former does not impose a difference between the subject (human) and object (nature): ‘Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it [magic] pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:7).

On the other side of the spectrum, unfolding rationality falls back into myth, be it in the form of fascism, the cultural industry, or, as argued at the end of the article, Indonesia’s development (*pembangunan*) ideology. This development ideology is inevitably linked with modernity, since it suggests perceiving nature as a raw material. As it relies on rationality, the modernity of *pembangunan* does not take development as a means for human purposes but, rather, as a purpose in itself. Such failures of rationality provide the basis for myths that rationally explain irrationality in society, whether that irrationality be anti-Semitism or haunting ghosts. Another common feature of enlightenment in the widest sense of the term is that enlightenment and rationality are in need of a distance between subject and object. In the case of animism, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the concept of spirits is the echo of an objective and actual superiority of nature over humans. In other words, ‘horror is permanently linked to holiness’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:10) in animism, with ‘horror’ here meaning people’s fear of struggling for their survival, while holiness is a cipher for all kinds of magical or religious concepts, including animism.

Animism splits nature into animate and inanimate, that is, it ‘doubles nature’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:11). The division between subject and object originates here, but in animism the relationship between nature and men is intimate since nature itself contains a subject dimension. However, the distance in this relationship grows in the rationality of Western science, as the doubling effect is reinvented by conceptualizing nature in abstract terms. Conceptualized in abstract terms, nature emerges as mere matter, manipulable through abstract knowledge such as formulae. Just as nature is manipulated through interaction with spirits in animism, it is manipulated in science by reducing it to a set of abstract concepts. However, such a modern way of dealing with nature does not necessarily mean that spirits have to disappear. Rather, modernizing forces such as science or religion provide new modes of reconfiguring the role of spirits. As I argue in the following, horror does not necessarily disappear when nature is dominated to a higher degree. The focus of holiness might shift from animism to religion, but horror can remain a crucial part of holiness when the new holiness fails to reconcile nature and society but, rather, drives them apart through horror.

3 Narrating Kuntilanak

The ghost of Kuntilanak is well known throughout the Malay realm. That realm covers the area historically inhabited by Malay-speaking Muslim groups and consists of the contemporary states of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei, as well as the southern parts of the Philippines and Thailand (Salleh 2010:xvi). In those countries, Kuntilanak (in Malaysia and Singapore referred to as Pontianak) is known as a female ghost with vampire-like characteristics: attracted by blood, which she also uses as her nourishment, she is dangerous to women giving birth. As an undead person, she threatens the living since she cannot find peace. She wears white clothes and it is said that she usually lives under trees or in the jungle.

I suggest that there are three types of narratives about Kuntilanak: those in popular culture; local Malay narratives about Kuntilanak as a threatening ghost that haunts people; and the local founding myth of the city of Pontianak, in which the concept of Kuntilanak ghosts plays a crucial role. Even though these narratives are different and rely on distinct notions of the ghost—narratives in popular culture, for instance, are heavily influenced by Western concepts of vampires (Grady 1996)—these narratives also use similar motives, which are crucial to the analysis in this contribution. In the following, I outline some of these motives, referring to Kuntilanak’s representation in popular culture

and Malay folk stories. However, for the main argument, the founding myth of Pontianak is most crucial. As I will demonstrate, important motives in other narratives derive from this local myth.

Novels (for instance, Handoyo 2006; Wisanggenti 2017; Lovanisa 2014) and most of all films (for example, the *Kuntilanak* trilogy by Rizal Mantovani shown in Indonesian cinemas in 2006, 2007 and 2008; *Paku Kuntilanak* [2009] a film by Findu Purnowo; and *Voodoo Nightmare. Return to Pontianak* [2001] by the Singaporean director Ong Lay Jinn) have contributed to Kuntilanak's popularity and made her one of the most prominent ghosts of Nusantara. The ghost is now also well known in peripheral parts of Indonesia, where Indonesian horror films or documentary-style programmes on Indonesian television, such as *Silet*, reach a large audience (Bubandt 2012:11). Kuntilanak even found her way into commercials. The film industry in Malaysia (formerly British Malaya) began to make horror films on Kuntilanak from the fifties and sixties onwards. Recently, religiously motivated censorship has played a greater role in Kuntilanak films (Odell and Le Blanc 2008:81). While these films and novels have their own distinct plots, they usually rely on main narratives commonly shared by people in the Malay realm through folk stories.

Such folk stories have been analysed especially in regard to gender ideology (Nicholas and Kline 2010). Indeed, Kuntilanak/Pontianak is always female. In some narratives it is said that she is a victim of rape who fell pregnant and was eventually killed by her rapists. Kuntilanak appears here as a traumatized ghost seeking revenge against men.² She is death hiding in beauty and temptation, which makes the death even more frightening (compare Bubandt 2012:10). Another main narrative is that she found an unhappy death in childbirth. Both narratives indicate that Kuntilanak is a malevolent spirit, since she experienced a 'bad death', a concept also known in other parts of Southeast Asia (see, for example, Fox 1973). Indeed, the word *anak* in Kuntilanak/Pontianak means 'child' in Malay. As she is undead, Kuntilanak/Pontianak can be both a gruesome and dangerous vampire, with white clothes and long black hair, but also a woman subjected to the traditional roles of womanhood. She becomes the latter when caught and a spike or a nail is driven into her head or the nape of her neck. In their analyses of Pontianak narratives in Malaysia, Nicholas and Kline (2010:202) pointed out the phallic symbolism behind the spike. When human, Kuntilanak is a beautiful and subordinated woman. However, when the spike or nail is removed she turns into a ghost again. She is then uncontrolled

2 These narratives are common throughout Indonesia. In Jakarta, *Si manis jembatan Ancol* (The sweet girl from Ancol bridge) and in Makassar, the ghost of *Sumiati*, for instance, refer to similar stories.

and symbolically depicts the inappropriate aspects of female behaviour. She seduces men and is dangerous to pregnant women; when nearby, one can hear her loud and shrieking laughing, which is also considered inappropriate behaviour for Malay women. Cohen (1996:16) stresses the connection between the dangerous features of monsters, the need to evict these characteristics, and the latent potential of their return: 'The monster is transgressive, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker; and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed. The repressed, however, like Freud himself, always seems to return.' This is true for the monstrous aspect of Kuntilanak as a female ghost that can seduce but is independent (and therefore dangerous) when not controlled by the spike in her head.

Many Malays believe Kuntilanak/Pontianak to be a ghost living far from the cities. Her place is the forest or, at least, huge trees. Artificial lights and electric sounds frighten her. That common perception of Kuntilanak/Pontianak as a ghost of nature is also often displayed in horror films. In the first *Kuntilanak* (2006) film by Rizal Mantovani, for instance, Kuntilanak lives in a weeping fig tree in front of a house she haunts. In *Return to Pontianak* (2001), young cosmopolitan urbanites from Singapore become victims of Kuntilanak in the jungle of Borneo. As Tan (2010:158) stresses, nature has an obvious female connotation in that film, as it 'uncannily recalls the mother's womb: dark, wet, fertile, organic, engulfing', but it is also a place of danger and the opposite of urbanized Singapore. In *Kuntilanak-Kuntilanak* (2012), to draw on another example, a single mother and her two daughters encounter the ghost in a remote house surrounded by woods. Here again, the journey to a remote place far from civilization is a journey to the world inhabited by Kuntilanak and to the trauma of urban modern society.

4 Local Narratives in Pontianak: The Origin of Kuntilanak

A less-known narrative was also made into a film in 2016 by Agung Trihatmodjo. The title of the film is *Pontien: Pontianak untold story*, and the film deals, among other things, with the founding myth of the city of Pontianak. As mentioned above, the ghost of Kuntilanak is termed Pontianak in Malaysia and Singapore, which refers to the origin of the ghost, the capital of the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan. Also, the Mandarin name for the city of Pontianak, Kūn diàn (坤甸), provides an indication of the connection between Kuntilanak and the town (Asma 2013:xxxiv). Whereas the founding myth of the city and Kuntilanak's role in it are commonly known only in West Kalimantan, the town is widely considered as the city of Kuntilanak throughout Indonesia.

That fact generated debate in 2017, when the head of the *Dinas kepemudaan, olah raga dan pariwisata* (Department of Youth, Sport and Tourism) in Pontianak made statements in favour of constructing a one-hundred-metre-high statue of Kuntilanak beside the Kapuas River in order to attract tourists.³ As the statue seemed to be oversized, the idea did not get much support from the local community. Moreover, friends in the city told me that they found the idea of erecting a Kuntilanak statue in the city quite frightening.

Despite the people's concern, Kuntilanak is well known in the city of Pontianak, as she plays a crucial role in the founding myth of the city (Devanastya et al. 2011:23). The story that people of Pontianak tell about Kuntilanak differs from the folk stories mentioned above, since in Pontianak the ghost is often mentioned as an important figure in the founding myth of the city. Additionally, there are folk stories using similar narratives that are well known throughout the Malay realm. The narratives told in Pontianak are alternative narratives in the sense that they provide an additional story that does not contradict the narratives mentioned above. Rather, there are clear similarities between Kuntilanak narratives elsewhere and that of the founding myth of the city, such as the gender issues raised in the narrative. In the narrative of the story in Pontianak, the ghost appears to be the original inhabitant of the area today known as the city of Pontianak. However, I will argue in the following that the story can also be read as a narrative in which spirits did not disappear but rather produced new dichotomies, such as the nature–culture distinction. The founding myth of the city is part of the commonly shared cultural Malay knowledge in West Kalimantan and also mentioned in many books on the city. The first sultan of Pontianak and founder of the city, Syarif Abdurrahim, is said to have founded Pontianak in 1771. A nobleman of Arab descent, he was given land at the confluence of major rivers near the delta of the Kapuas River, a location of strategic importance since the river served as the main trading route for transporting goods from the interior of the island.

However, the delta was also home to pirates. Official narratives emphasize that Syarif Abdurrahim's task was to establish the city as a fortress against the pirates (Hasanuddin 2014:21–2). For Malay traders the blocked trading route upstream was an obstacle. By that time, other sultanates along the coast had already been established for generations, but the Islamic civilization (*masyarakat madani*) was not yet able to occupy that strategically and economically

3 Bagus Prihantoro Nugroho, 'Wacana patung Kuntilanak di Pontianak', *Detik News*, 17-5-2017. <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3503328/wacana-patung-kuntilanak-di-pontianak> (accessed 18-9-2018).

important place at the delta of the Kapuas River. The area was still swampland and dense jungle: some claim that the name 'Pontianak' originates from the Malay *po(ho)n ti(nggi)*, meaning 'high tree' (Asma 2013:xxxiii), an interesting suggestion that later becomes important for the interpretation of Kuntilanak narratives—high trees are often associated with owner spirits in rural areas of West Kalimantan.

In order to get an overview of the founding myth, a quote from the book *Pontianak heritage dan beberapa yang berciri khas Pontianak* is provided here, since it captures some of the main components of the founding myth not yet mentioned:

The folk story (folklore) regarding the name Pontianak originates from the ghost of Kuntilanak, or female ghost. There were, as they used to say, many Kuntilanak ghosts at the confluence of the Great Kapuas River, the Minor Kapuas River, and the Landak River. The story begins when Syarif Abdurrahim's group arrived in that area. They noticed many disturbances and frightening sounds. The disturbances were perceived as evil ghosts, as Kuntilanak ghosts, and they frightened the people on the boat. The next day, they would not continue with their journey [...]. Thus, as a means of evicting the ghosts, Syarif Abdurrahim fired cannon.

ASMA 2013:xxxii–xxxiii, translation by the author

When I talked about that story with people at the sultan's palace (*kraton*), they mentioned the act of evicting (*usir*) Kuntilanak as heroic and as a basic condition for the establishment of the settlement. With regard to the cannon (*meriam*), the phallic dimension in Kuntilanak narratives emerges again. Today, the traditional cannon can be found in Malay settlements at Pontianak's riverside. According to some people in Pontianak, there used to be annual festivals in order to commemorate the founding of the city, during which people fired the cannon and thereby symbolically evicted Kuntilanak. But during the New Order the annual event and the cannon disappeared. In the course of the revitalization of tendencies of 'traditional' Malayhood, however, some citizens have set up cannon again in recent years. This indicates the need to repeat the eviction symbolically; Kuntilanak may be banished to the *pendalaman*, but people must still use certain means to keep her at bay.

Moreover, Kuntilanak narratives are also framed in religious terms. This is true especially for narratives in local Malay folk stories. Some of my friends explained that Kuntilanak falls into a certain category of ghosts also mentioned in the Quran: the *jin haffaf*. Sometimes Kuntilanak is also termed *jin setan* (devilish ghost, devil). These ghosts are said to be hostile to humans. They

frighten human beings, but by conducting regular prayers humans can keep these ghosts at bay. Not surprisingly, people believe that the sound of prayer calls (*azan*) also dispels Kuntilanak.

In local folk stories, Kuntilanak sometimes transcends the borders between humans and animals. Some informants say that she can turn into a bird when she needs to travel long distances (a feature also mentioned in Lai 2014). Her closeness to nature is indeed an important characteristic. As mentioned, her representation in popular culture often refers to this, but also people in Pontianak stressed her association with nature: Kuntilanak used to live in tall trees at the confluence of the Kapuas and Landak rivers. As mentioned above, it is said that the 'Ponti' in Pontianak originates from the Malay *pohon tinggi*, meaning 'tall tree' or 'tall trees'. Whereas Kuntilanak/Pontianak elsewhere is often associated with banana trees (*Musa genus*; in Indonesian: *pohon pisang*), people in Pontianak usually associated the ghost with large trees, for instance banyan fig trees (*Ficus genus*; Indonesian: *pohon beringin*).

This perception probably derives from the founding myth of the city, which portrayed Kuntilanak as a spirit bound to live by tall trees next to the river. As Kuntilanak was evicted, it is said that Syarif Abdurrahim and his men cut down the trees and used the wood to build the Great Mosque and, a few years later, the sultan's palace (*kraton*) as the centre of the newly emerging *masyarakat madani*. Through the act of cutting down the trees, the place was transformed from a wilderness into a place of Muslim Malay civilization. Thus, the frightening, terrifying dimension of wilderness and pirates (and, additionally, femaleness) was symbolically transformed into the ghost of Kuntilanak. The eviction, however, did not annihilate the ghost. Rather, Kuntilanak became inscribed in the self-conception of the Muslim Malay civilization as its negation: where there used to be tall trees, uninhabited swamp, and a refuge for pirates, a place of Muslim civilization emerged. Where there used to be a place of evil spirits, a centre for the *masyarakat madani* had been established. Finally, the Kapuas River became a gateway for both Muslim civilization and trade towards the interior of the island after the establishment of the city. From the nineteenth century onwards, Chinese, Malay, and Bugis traders who resided in Pontianak carried goods upstream, trading with the local sultans. They later traded the goods with Dayak from the hinterland, who paid with rice, handicrafts, gold, and rubber (Heidhues 2003). The establishment of the city of Pontianak had a crucial economic impact on large parts of what is today the province of West Kalimantan. The interior of the island became accessible but never lost its function as the uncivilized opposite of the coastal area; the hinterland was partly incorporated into economic systems but remained the place to which Kuntilanak was evicted. The distinction between civilization/Muslim/coastal

areas on the one hand and the dangerous *pendalaman* on the other hand has its origins in the time of trading but also has its roots in the concept of the domesticated and the undomesticated common in Southeast Asian animism (Århem 2016:296–7). Unlike Western modernity, this narrative of Malay modernity did not seek to eradicate the concept of ghosts. Disenchantment only took place insofar as the ghost was evicted to another place, that is, the localized other of the coastal town: the jungle of the interior (*pendalaman*) of Borneo, as a place of nature and the uncivilized.

How does Kuntilanak haunt the people in Pontianak today? In order to understand the frightening potential of the ghost, I will draw on Cohen's (1996) 'monster theory'. Cohen formulated seven theses about monsters, how monstrosity is produced, and which functions monsters fulfil in society. As Kuntilanak has been evicted, most people I talked to perceived the city to be quite a safe place. Some do, however, avoid doing anything that might gain Kuntilanak's attention. I particularly discovered this attitude on the outskirts of the city where I spent most of my time in Pontianak. My *kos* was located in the last building before farmland began. People there told me that they do not leave laundry on clotheslines during the night, since that could draw Kuntilanak's attention. People there are familiar with the founding myth and believe that the ghost has been evicted. However, the horror can appear suddenly when sitting together at night and the talk turns to Kuntilanak. That makes her present in people's minds, and on several occasions I was asked not to talk about her when it was dark. Some even stressed that talking about the ghost could make her appear. It is therefore not surprising that residences keep a light on at the front of their houses during the night. A lamp was even illuminated every night outside an abandoned house near my *kos* in order to keep the evil ghost at bay.

According to Cohen, the 'monster always escaped to return to its habitation at the margins of the world' (Cohen 1996:6). The monster always escapes—in the case of Kuntilanak—to the interior of Borneo, dwells in the margins, and thus threatens to return. The frightening potential of Kuntilanak originates in her escape and in the potential return. The monster is 'difference made flesh', 'an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond' (Cohen 1996:7). Kuntilanak indeed emerges as the opposite of human society. Yet, she shows human characteristics and therefore escapes the classificatory orders (in this case, the binary human/non-human). Another source of Kuntilanak's monstrosity is her ability to elicit feelings of fear, desire, and anxiety, which gives her independence, as humans do not dare to dominate her (compare Cohen 1996:4). The fear of Kuntilanak thus fulfils a cultural purpose. As she patrols and dwells the borders of the possible, she restricts social behaviour. Cohen (1996:12–3) stresses that monsters hold together social systems by making borders visible—bor-

ders of social behaviour and borders of social space. The fear, thus, originates from what lies beyond these borders and what protects these borders—the *pendalaman*, nature, inappropriate behaviour towards the other gender. What we can see here is both fear and attraction (compare Cohen 1996:16–20): the story of Kuntilanak is well known, and, to a certain degree, my friends found it entertaining to talk about her, but things become different when it is dark. Several times I had the impression that people on purpose talked about Kuntilanak, sharing stories of her appearance they had heard from friends, just in order to attract other people's attention through fear. The fear holds the group together, making people collectively watching out for signs of Kuntilanak. However, the fear is also a source of attraction, and the fact that the city considered to build a giant Kuntilanak statue is proof of the ghost's ambivalent features. This dualism of fear and attraction in Pontianak mirrors the emotions of the people consuming Kuntilanak films in the cinema. Both are forms of sentimental education through which people learn how to cultivate both fear of, and attraction to, horror.

5 Spirits and Dichotomies in Kalimantan

The narratives of Kuntilanak as found in pop culture and folk stories are narratives of spirits shaped by Islamic perceptions. Islam was the religion of traders arriving on the shores of Borneo as a modernizing force from the fifteenth century onwards, successively supplanting Buddhist, Hindu, and animist belief systems, especially in coastal areas. Thus, Malay identity developed through the process of Islam as a unifying religion, coastal trade, and a common Malay language used for trading. In the common perception, Malays follow a cosmopolitan way of life; they are also perceived as people with a long history of statehood. In contrast, the people in the *pendalaman* of Kalimantan are commonly referred to as 'Dayak', and in many ways their identity is constructed as being the opposite of what it is to be Malay. However, it is crucial here to mention that the category of 'Dayak' was not common during the early colonial era. 'Dayak' is an umbrella term for hundreds of ethnic groups featuring different languages, cultures, social organizations, and traditions (Tanasaldy 2012:49). Until young Dayak from different areas met in mission schools, there was no consciousness of a common identity. Before the *pesisir/pendalaman* (coastal/interior) dichotomy became hegemonic, these groups gave themselves names relating to a geographic entity, such as a river (Rousseau 2000:11). The term 'Dayak' as a category, introduced by the Dutch to refer to all non-Malay natives in Kalimantan, probably comes from the Kenyah language,

where 'daya' means 'upriver' or 'interior'; this implies that the very term 'Dayak' indicates an identity conceptualized as the opposite of the *pesisir*. While the term 'Dayak' became a derogative ascription within the context of colonialism, the term 'daya' had no pejorative connotation (Duile 2017a:125). These ascriptions—'Dayak' as farmers engaging in shifting cultivation or even hunter-gatherers, as 'primitive' animists or Christians, and 'Malay' as people connected to the sea, Islam, and civilization—are both simplifying stereotypes and influential categories shaping actual identities. It has been demonstrated that many ethnic groups in Kalimantan are actually in between these categories (Sillander 2004). On the other hand, the dichotomy between Malay and Dayak is influential when it comes to conflicts and tensions based on the foundation of ethnic belonging or in political campaigns. However, Dayak and most Malays have the same ancestors. Especially in the interior, many Malays are simply Dayak that have converted to Islam (Tanasaldy 2012:50–8). In hegemonic discourses, however, Dayak and the interior are still perceived as the opposite of civilized. Thus, it is not surprising that Kuntilanak was evicted to the *pendalaman*, as she is connoted with ferociousness, an attribute found in both the wilderness and rampant female behaviour. In all narratives, Kuntilanak emerges as an evil ghost from the very beginning, which legitimizes the actions against her. She is said to be the original inhabitant of the confluence and her home, the tall trees beside the rivers, was cut down in order to establish the new civilization.

In the following, I especially refer to spirit perceptions of Dayak activists at the Pontianak-based Institut Dayakologi. Although the activists came from different Dayak groups (Kanayatn, Iban, and Jalai, to name only a few) they all stressed that there are typical features in Dayak animism that can be found throughout the province. One such feature is the concept of place-bound spirits. Many Dayak refer to place-bound spirits as *penunggu* (Indonesian for 'someone who is waiting'), a term for spirits common throughout Indonesia. I also found such concepts when I spent time in rural Dayak communities (Bekati Dayak in Bengkayang regency) without the Dayak activists. It can be assumed, therefore, that these concepts are indeed widespread in Kalimantan. Dayak are also familiar with the ghost of Kuntilanak. However, neither Dayak activists nor Dayak farmers mentioned Kuntilanak when I asked about the Dayak's beliefs in spirits; rather, they claimed to know Kuntilanak from popular culture. Indeed, as I argue in the following, the concept of a place-bound spirit who is merely evil and threatening does not conflate with the Dayak conception of spirits, since through communication and social interaction in rituals a mutual relationship is maintained.

How do Dayak activists and animist Dayak describe the general characteristics of these spirits? A crucial feature is that they are bound to places like

rivers, confluences, huge trees, or other outstanding natural entities. While humans view huge trees as part of the natural environment, *penunggu* consider them domiciles. In recent efforts to revitalize Dayak identity in the course of fighting against environmental degradation, the concept of such non-human beings has become an explanation of why Dayak traditionally maintain a close relationship with nature (Duile 2017b:10–17). Indeed, these spirits are not equivalent to the ghosts of horror stories. The latter are rather called *hantu* in Indonesian. While ghosts are frightening, uncontrolled in the sense that they are unsocial with human beings and dangerous, the place-bound spirits are beings in the sense that they maintain social relationships with humans. These spirits are invisible, yet they can communicate with humans in dreams or rituals. If humans treat them appropriately, *penunggu* are benevolent and help by keeping vegetable gardens or rice fields free from pests. However, violations of the spirits' rights can make them vengeful. A serious violation, for instance, is to cut down a tree under which a spirit lives without gaining the spirit's permission. That is why, before clearing forest land for a dry rice field (*ladang*), many Dayak communities conduct a ceremony in which the spirits are asked for their permission. During or after the ceremony the spirits will appear in the form of an animal, or in dreams, and will let people know whether they approve or disapprove of the community's request. When they disapprove, the spirit might be moved in a ceremony, or the community will search for an alternative place to establish the *ladang* (Duile 2017b:13). These place-bound spirits are perceived to be like persons and are said to have human-like characteristics. As such, they have cultural institutions such as kinship systems and artefacts (houses, for instance; but to humans, these houses appear as trees or rocks). Just as humans, they can be male or female, but the Dayak I talked to, both common people and shamans, never stressed the importance of a *penunggu*'s gender. Just like Kuntilanak, place-bound spirits can transcend the border between humans and animals, but *penunggu* do so usually in order to communicate with humans: during rituals, *penunggu* often appear as birds, and shamans subsequently interpret the birdsong.

The concept of geographically bound spirits residing under trees is not uncommon in many parts of the Indonesian archipelago, and many Malays also believe in the existence of such spirits. However, they usually do not maintain ritualized forms of communication with those spirits in the way that many animist Dayak communities do. Human–spirit interactions in Malay communities are usually restricted to spirits of the ancestors. In some households, people provide offerings (in Pontianak referred to as *robo-robo*) to ancestor spirits, and interaction with ancestor spirits is also common among many Dayak communities (Couderc and Sillander 2012). For Dayak in subsistence or

extended subsistence economies, interaction with the natural environment is still crucial, while for Malays who live in towns—trading or working in offices or the craft sector—the natural environment is often just a place of danger. Also, Malay perceptions of spirits are influenced by Islam. As trading towns such as Pontianak developed, new forms of economy arose and the role of spirits was renegotiated. It is of course problematic to see the perception of spirits in Dayak communities as a glimpse into Borneo's past, and thus it is also problematic to claim that the recent interaction between spirits and rural Dayak communities was common throughout the island before monotheism arrived. Dayak–spirit interactions are subject to change as well—both are distinct ways of dealing with and perceiving spirits. Nonetheless, the similarities between Kuntilanak and *penunggu* are striking: both seem to be geographically bound spirits connected to trees. Removal of the trees against their will makes them hostile.

As Dayak in rural communities and urban Malays have different ways of life, belief systems, and economies, their perceptions of spirits differ. In the case of Kuntilanak the hostility emerges as the essence of the spirit, which makes her a terrifying ghost. The *penunggu* is merely hostile insofar as hostility is a person's characteristic: if a *penunggu* turns malevolent, it is a personal characteristic potentially caused by humans having violated the *penunggu*'s rights. Kuntilanak, according to the narrative of the founding myth, is malign from the very beginning. And it is Kuntilanak's malignance that legitimizes her eviction by cannon. That is why the sultan's act appears heroic: evicting the evil ghost is the precondition for establishing a culture in opposition to nature, which is embodied by Kuntilanak not belonging to human society.

Thus, the practices of the animist Dayak and the practices in Kuntilanak narratives, both in the founding myth of Pontianak and in horror stories, are two different ways of dealing with non-human beings. Whereas the first way addresses the spirit as an invisible being and therefore blurs the border between nature and culture (*penunggu* live in the forest/natural environment but are cultural beings as they are considered to be human-like), the Kuntilanak narratives position the ghost in the sphere of nature in that Kuntilanak is alienated from the human *masyarakat madani* of Malay modernity. However, Kuntilanak does not completely merge into nature, as the ghost appears to have a human form. As such, Kuntilanak embodies uncivilized human characteristics and haunts all human attempts at civilization.

Both *penunggu* and Kuntilanak can be seen as expressions of typical features in Southeast Asian animism: throughout the region it is common in animist societies to assume that the forest is inhabited by spirits and that human settlers can only obtain legitimate control over nature through elaborate founders'

rituals. The original inhabitants are usually, as Kaj Århem terms them, 'owner spirits' bound to places like springs, streams, or old trees. However, animist societies continue their relationship with the owner spirits in regular rituals and sacrifices; the beings are ritually domesticated and thus brought under a certain measure of control by humans. In the case of Dayak animism, it can be added that this project of 'ontological domestication' (Århem 2016:296–7) is a project of maintaining an original state of domestication: as it is said that *penunggu* and humans once lived in one society, rituals are now being carried out in order to maintain an aspect of that original state of human–spirit relationships. However, the deeper the forest and the further a place is away from settlements, the more difficult is it to keep spirits under control. It is not surprising, then, that malevolent spirits are often associated with the deep forest or special features of the natural environment, such as river confluents or large trees. However, as Sillander (2016:161), writing about the Bentian Dayak, also stresses, spirits do not fall into different categories (malevolent and benevolent spirits); rather, the term 'malevolent spirit' here describes the role or behaviour of a spirit. When treated correctly, a potentially malevolent spirit can be domesticated, in the sense that through human–spirit relationships the malevolent potential of the spirit is diminished.

In the founding myth of Pontianak, on the other hand, the bond between humans and spirits maintained in rituals and sacrifices disappears. An animist relationship of exchange and communication (usually through the medium of a shaman; see Århem 2016:290–3) is replaced by an increased othering (female, unable to communicate, essentially evil) of the spirit and finally by disruption through eviction without compensation. The eviction, thus, points to what became the constitutive outside of the *masyarakat madani*: the hinterland. The eviction therefore is a means of constructing the dichotomy between the Malay *pesisir* and the mysterious, dangerous realm of the *pendalaman* as conceptual loci.

6 Conclusion: Kuntilanak, Animism, and Modernity

I argued that the narratives of Kuntilanak, as found in folk stories and in the founding myth of the city of Pontianak, depict a specific Malay modernity. While dealing with ghosts, the narratives are explicitly modern, since they constitute and depend on a separation between culture and nature; operating as a form of enlightenment, the narratives turn nature into an object for human development. In this case, this separation is not based on Western dichotomies but on Islam as a modernizing force. For Nicholas and Kline (2010), the narrat-

ive of Pontianak/Kuntilanak, as it emerges in the myth of a woman enslaved and controlled by men, contains a mode of negotiating between pre-modern and modern paradigms. To them, there is a 'shift from mysticism to science' (Nicholas and Kline 2010:197). Malay societies, Nicholas and Kline explain, referring to Osman (1972:221–2), are based on the interaction between three worldviews—Islam, traditional beliefs, and Western scientific knowledge—which together constitute a specific belief system. Thus, they argue that both Islam and traditional beliefs fall within the category of the pre-modern, opposing the modern, empirical logic of science. Nicholas and Kline also state that such dualisms are 'inherently and hegemonically reductionistic' (Nicholas and Kline 2010:198), yet they are the basis used by Malay communities to make sense of the world, and are applied pragmatically.

I argued that Islam appears here as a modernizing force. Islam does not simply fall within the same category as 'traditional beliefs' or animism, nor is it the opposition of rationality. By applying a dialectical approach, I suggested that myth and rationality are intermingled. Both animism and religion are modes of giving meaning to nature in order to rule over it.

The Dayak apply animism in a mimetic way. They communicate with the spirits. This, however, implies an attempt to tame the spirits. Animism in the Kuntilanak narrative aims to rule over nature by adding a religious layer onto the concept of *penunggu* and thus distinguishing between culture (the city, *pesisir*) and nature (*pendalaman*). By providing a mental device for ruling over nature, the myths contain a form of enlightenment. However, there are different modes of myth and religion in West Kalimantan, depending on the economic and cultural organization of the respective societies. While animism is a mode common in rural Dayak areas in Kalimantan, and one now also utilized by indigenous activists, Islam is influential in Malay towns where products and labour are offered on markets and the community of competitors is held together through identities such as Islam, Malayness, and the related notions of *masyarakat madani*, urbanity, and cosmopolitanism (as the opposite of the *pendalaman*). The concept of *penunggu* as applied in rural areas offers a way of dealing with nature by absorbing it into the human sphere, at least to a certain degree. In contrast, Kuntilanak is ousted from the human sphere into nature. But nature keeps on haunting society, because the structure of the narrative and the modern Malay way of approaching nature provides no possibility of reconciliation between culture/society and nature.

Writing about Chiang Mai, Andrew Johnson has argued that the fear of ghosts in the city derives from an uneasiness with modernity: the self-concept of being modern and advanced becomes an estranged one, and this estrangement emerges in places that are expressions of modernity itself (Johnson

2014:29). Likewise, in Pontianak, modernity relies on the fear of Kuntilanak, yet the reverse is also true: Kuntilanak is an expression of modernity. But whereas in Chiang Mai ghosts became residents of the city, haunting the ruins of progress, people in Pontianak managed to maintain a spatial distance to Kuntilanak. However, this distance is a fragile one. Narratives of Kuntilanak are present, as is the fear. Modernity, in this sense, is inevitably connected to the haunting that might reclaim the city in times of crises.

I have suggested to read the myth of Kuntilanak as a form of 'enlightenment in the widest sense' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:1): by evicting the ghost of Kuntilanak, a once uninhabitable place becomes inhabitable and governable. Thus nature, once inhabited by spirits, turns into a resource for the establishment of Malay civilization. Humans become masters over nature. However, rationality here comes with religion: the cannon depict both the technique (rationality) and the violence modernity needs to get rid of the haunting spirits. But the *masyarakat madani* approach to the myth is not fully rational, in the sense of a total disenchantment, since Kuntilanak, though evicted, remains present in the collective memory, which she haunts. While arguing against an animism that obligates humans to uphold reciprocal relationships with spirits, that is, positioning the spirits as social beings, it must be acknowledged that the myth of Kuntilanak is not entirely rational; it only keeps the spirit out of the Malay/Muslim city. In doing so, it creates a realm of enchantment: the *pendalaman*.

The ways of dealing with spirits are both rational and irrational. The negotiation between animism, Islam, and rationality as expressed in the myth is not simply based on a juxtaposition of dualistic terms of religion/tradition on the one hand and rationality on the other. Both modes of perceiving the world are entwined: the myth of Kuntilanak and the animism of *penunggu* contain rationality, since they make sense of the natural environment and thus make nature controllable to a certain degree. When Dayak shaman communicate with *penunggu*, humans and spirits are in a mode of sameness. This is mimetic behaviour, which Horkheimer and Adorno mentioned as a concept of animism (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:6). This mimetic approach vanishes in the founding myth of Pontianak. Not sameness but radical difference characterizes the relation between humans and the *penunggu*, which here appears as the terrifying Kuntilanak. The negotiations, as manifested in the founding myth of the city of Pontianak and in the practices regarding *penunggu*, are expressions of certain economic and political circumstances, and yet they make sense of society as it is: as an 'extended society' including *penunggu* (in the case of Dayak animism) or as a modern Islamic society in opposition to nature, with Kuntilanak as the embodiment of the society's other. When, as Horkheimer

and Adorno (2002:10) argue in the *Dialectic of enlightenment*, horror is linked to holiness in animism, it can be argued that in Malay modernity holiness (as religion) is linked to horror. On the one hand, Kuntilanak as an evil ghost (*jin haffaf*) is the opposite of holiness and the horror of Kuntilanak needs holiness as its constituting opposite. On the other hand, holiness needs the horror of Kuntilanak as its foundation. The rationality that accompanies Islam indeed provides a way of perceiving nature as a resource, in the sense that Kuntilanak is evicted and can be kept at bay through religious performances. But the distance between men and spirits introduced and maintained by Islam is at the same time the very foundation of a new horror. Humans do not pay their dues to spirits but evict them in order to appropriate their territory. Humans gained control over land but lost control over spirits. On the surface, cannon and Islamic performances are all that is required to annex a space once inhabited by spirits. But the horror of Kuntilanak testifies to the remorse buried in the collective subconscious. That this remorse is a collective one can be seen in the overwhelming popularity of Kuntilanak throughout the Malay realm. In Pontianak, Kuntilanak is present precisely through her absence. She is a threat-not-here and therefore she is meaningful. Horror emerges through the idea that the distance between her and the human community is an uncertain one, and this is probably also the reason why the idea of building a Kuntilanak statue was heavily criticized.

Kuntilanak is also a testimony to the distance between subject and object introduced by enlightenment in the widest sense of the term. As a passive object she is evicted, and her erstwhile home, the tall trees, become the objects (raw material) for development. Thus, it is probably no coincidence that Kuntilanak became famous throughout Indonesia as a ghost in horror novels and films. As the self-conception of Indonesian society moved towards a development (*pembangunan*) paradigm during the Soeharto era, nature became a mere resource for development (Arnscheidt 2009:117–24). However, the rationality of the *pembangunan* paradigm required a concept of nature as the terrifying other of society, since the idea of *pembangunan* was in need of a legitimization of the dominance of men over nature. *Pembangunan* constitutes a project of modernity in Indonesia, as it has become a focal point of national-identity making and economic planning, as well as a means of shifting the discourse from 'conflictual' political topics towards the unifying aim of development (Moon 2015:181–2). Islam and other acknowledged religions were inevitably embedded into the project of *pembangunan*, since it legitimized treating nature as a raw material given to humans for their use.

Once, the project of Indonesia was based on the idea of a just and inclusive society for all citizens, and progress was seen as a tool for achieving a good life

for all citizens. As the New Order society lacked rationality in the sense that development and progress became uncoupled from a just development and a humane society for all, and while corruption and violence lingered on and poverty continued to be an issue despite huge economic growth, the narrative of development as a purpose in and of itself contained a huge amount of irrationality. This irrationality within the rational framework of *pembangunan* lives on in democratic Indonesia, and has become one of the major discourses in politics again (Warburton 2016). Further research might concern the question of how the abstract idea of development evokes the idea of nature and horror, since it seems that nature continues to be the constitutive outside of the civilized, advanced society. Yet, society mirrors its own irrationality in narratives about its others. Kuntilanak thus embodies the fear and irrationality not only of the female but also of nature as it is contextualized in Indonesian modernity. As nature and society remain unreconciled, Kuntilanak will keep on haunting the archipelago.

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