

Supernatural Warnings: The Role of Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-Onna in Addressing Child and Family Issues

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the supernatural figures Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna in the folklore of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan, respectively, analysing their roles in shaping societal perceptions of child safety and parental responsibility. These legends function as cautionary tales that reflect deep-seated anxieties about neglect, discipline, and family dynamics. By employing comparative literature analysis, this research identifies cultural similarities and differences in how these figures reinforce behavioural norms through fear-based deterrents. Additionally, structuralist analysis reveals underlying binary oppositions such as protection vs. danger, obedience vs. disobedience, and care vs. neglect, demonstrating their function as moral regulators within their respective societies. Findings indicate that Hantu Kopek serves as a deterrent against wandering at night, reinforcing maternal supervision and obedience. Wewe Gombel, in contrast, critiques parental neglect, sheltering mistreated children until their guardians exhibit remorse. Ame-onna, associated with rain, warns children against environmental dangers, reinforcing the importance of staying close to family protection. Despite cultural variations, these supernatural entities serve as social control mechanisms, reinforcing community values through fear, discipline, and mythological storytelling. Furthermore, their continued relevance in modern media and digital storytelling highlights their adaptability in addressing contemporary child welfare and family issues. This study concludes that supernatural folklore remains a powerful tool for enforcing social norms, ensuring that family structures and community responsibilities are maintained through cautionary narratives that transcend generations.

Keywords: Supernatural folklore, child safety, parental responsibility, social regulation, comparative literature, structuralism, Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, Ame-onna.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, folklore has served as a crucial medium for transmitting moral lessons and cultural values. Among the many supernatural entities that populate Southeast Asian and Japanese folklore, certain spirits are specifically associated with child abduction, acting as cautionary figures that reflect deep-seated societal anxieties about parenting and family responsibilities. In Malaysia, the Hantu Kopek is feared for kidnapping disobedient children and hiding them under her breasts, reinforcing the importance of parental authority (Zamani et al., 2022). Similarly, Indonesia's Wewe Gombel takes away mistreated children, symbolizing both punishment for negligent parents and protection for the vulnerable. In Japan, the legend of Ame-onna warns against wandering during rainstorms, further emphasizing the role of supernatural figures in reinforcing

parental concerns (Shartle, 2022). These ghostly entities serve not merely as sources of fear but as mechanisms for social regulation, ensuring that children remain safe and parents fulfill their responsibilities.

Hantu Kopek, also known as Hantu Tetek, is a supernatural entity in Malaysian folklore associated with the abduction of children. This ghost is depicted as a terrifying female spirit with oversized breasts, which she uses to smother or hide children who wander off or disobey their parents. The legend serves as a warning for children to stay close to home and listen to their guardians, reinforcing traditional family values and parental authority (Zamani et al., 2022). Similarly, Wewe Gombel is a ghost in Javanese and Indonesian folklore, often described as a vengeful female spirit with long, sagging breasts who kidnaps neglected or mistreated children. Unlike malevolent spirits, Wewe Gombel does not harm the children but instead shelters and cares for them, only returning them once their parents show genuine remorse and change their behaviours. This legend highlights societal concerns about child neglect and the importance of responsible parenting (Lubna, 2021). In Japan, the folklore of Ame-onna, or "Rain Woman," presents a spectral figure associated with storms. Some versions of the legend depict her as a motherly figure who kidnaps or lures children away during rainstorms, emphasizing the dangers of wandering alone. While her character varies, she is often used as a cautionary figure to warn children against straying from their families, reinforcing the idea of parental protection (Fairuz & Efraim, 2021).

The function of supernatural entities in folklore extends beyond fear; they serve as a reflection of societal anxieties and moral guidance. Recent studies highlight how folklore adapts to contemporary issues, including the digital age and the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that supernatural narratives continue to evolve and retain cultural significance (Zamani et al., 2022). Similarly, the rhetoric of supernatural beliefs in digital media, such as YouTube and anime, has reshaped the perception of these figures, reinforcing their role in storytelling and moral instruction (Md. Zain, 2021; Fairuz & Efraim, 2021).

This study examines the roles of Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna as supernatural figures that serve to warn communities about child safety and family responsibilities. By analysing their functions in folklore, this research highlights how these entities reflect societal concerns about neglect, discipline, and parental care, demonstrating that supernatural narratives are integral to cultural mechanisms of social regulation.

This study adopts a comparative literature approach and applies structuralist analysis to examine the themes, ghostly behaviours, and warnings embedded in the folklore of Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna. Through comparative literature, the research identifies cross-cultural similarities and differences in how these spirits function within their respective societies, emphasizing their roles as cautionary figures reinforcing child safety and parental responsibility. Structuralism provides a framework to analyse the underlying structures that shape these narratives, focusing on binary oppositions such as protection vs. danger, parental neglect vs. care, and punishment vs. redemption. By deconstructing the behaviours of these ghosts—Hantu Kopek smothering children, Wewe Gombel sheltering the neglected, and Ame-onna luring them away—the study uncovers the shared moral and social anxieties they symbolize. Ultimately, this approach reveals how supernatural folklore serves as a regulatory mechanism, using fear to instill social values and reinforce community norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The supernatural entities Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna have been subjects of scholarly interest, particularly concerning their roles in folklore and their reflections on societal issues in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan. These legends, often rooted in traditional beliefs, serve as cautionary tales that address concerns related to child safety, parental responsibility, and broader societal anxieties.

Hantu Kopek (Malaysia)

Hantu Kopek, also known as Hantu Tetek, is a figure in Malaysian folklore depicted as a female spirit with large breasts, believed to abduct children who wander at night. While specific scholarly studies focusing exclusively on Hantu Kopek are limited, the entity is often discussed within broader analyses of Southeast Asian supernatural beliefs and their functions in society. These discussions highlight how such legends serve

as cautionary tales, emphasizing the importance of parental guidance and the dangers of straying from societal norms (Colletta & Colletta, 1976).

Wewe Gombel (Indonesia)

Wewe Gombel is a prominent figure in Javanese mythology, described as a vengeful female spirit who kidnaps children, particularly those neglected by their parents. Scholarly analyses have examined Wewe Gombel's role in reinforcing social norms related to child-rearing and parental responsibilities. For instance, studies have explored how the legend serves as a societal mechanism to promote proper child care and to caution against neglect, thereby reflecting communal values and anxieties (Developing the Social Work Role in Indonesian Child Protection, 2018).

Ame-onna (Japan)

In Japanese folklore, Ame-onna, or "Rain Woman," is associated with rain and is believed to abduct children during rainy nights. Scholarly research on Ame-onna has delved into her representation in Japanese culture, exploring themes of motherhood, femininity, and societal expectations. These studies often analyze how such figures embody cultural anxieties and serve as cautionary tales to reinforce social norms regarding child safety and parental roles (Child Welfare at the Forefront of Japanese Family Law Reform, 2023).

Child, Family, and Society Issues in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan

Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan face significant child and family welfare challenges, which have been widely discussed in contemporary research.

Child well-being remains a key concern in Malaysia, with studies identifying various socioeconomic and cultural factors influencing children's welfare (Unpacking the Complexities of Child Well-being in Southeast Asia, 2024). Issues such as child marriage persist, with reports indicating that nearly 16,000 girls below the age of 15 were in a marriage as of 2010. Factors contributing to early marriage include pre-marital pregnancies and parental decisions aimed at preventing perceived moral decline.

Indonesia faces challenges, including early marriage, child violence, and stunting. A study focusing on the Indonesia-Malaysia border areas identified significant family challenges, with 563 cases of early marriage involving teenagers aged 15-19 in 2022 alone. Child violence, particularly sexual abuse, remains a grave concern, with 101 cases reported over three years. Stunting affects 30.5% of children, especially in urban areas (National Child Protection Systems in the East Asia and Pacific Region, UNICEF). Additionally, research highlights the strong parental ties in Indonesia, emphasising the role of extended family structures in child-rearing (The Ties that Bind Indonesian Children and Their Parents, JSTOR).

In Japan, public attention has increasingly focused on reports of frequent child abuse in the home. The law grants child welfare officials the authority to prohibit abusive parents from meeting or communicating with their children, although due to Japanese cultural views on family matters being "private," this enforcement option is rarely exercised (Asian "Guan" Parenting and Life Satisfaction Among Adolescents, 2021). The law also bans abuse under the guise of discipline. It obliges teachers, doctors, and welfare officials to report suspicious circumstances to local child counseling centres or municipal welfare centres (Social-Emotional Development of Children in Asia: A Systematic Review, 2021).

These studies and reports collectively underscore the enduring relevance of supernatural legends like Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna. They function as cultural narratives and as societal tools reflecting and addressing ongoing concerns related to child welfare and family dynamics in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan. The persistence of these myths in contemporary discourse indicates their adaptability and significance in reinforcing moral lessons and social norms.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative literature approach and applies structuralist analysis to examine the folklore surrounding Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna. By integrating these two analytical frameworks, the research seeks to discern the unique cultural manifestations of these supernatural entities and the underlying

structural patterns that shape their narratives. Comparative literature is used to analyse the three ghostly figures across different cultural and historical contexts, enabling the identification of cross-cultural similarities and differences in how these spirits function within Malaysian, Indonesian, and Japanese societies. The study examines primary sources such as oral traditions, literary texts, and media adaptations, as well as secondary scholarly analyses exploring their cultural significance. Through comparative analysis, the study focuses on the cultural functions of each ghost as a cautionary figure reinforcing values related to child safety, parental responsibility, and societal order. It further examines narrative similarities, particularly shared themes of child abduction, fear as a disciplinary tool and parental accountability, while also considering contextual differences shaped by local beliefs, gender roles, and socio-political structures (Juvan, 2003). By drawing parallels and distinctions, this approach highlights how supernatural folklore operates as a means of social control, ensuring the transmission of moral lessons across generations (Dashti Ahangar, 2022).

Structuralism provides a framework to deconstruct the underlying narrative structures of these myths, revealing binary oppositions that shape their moral and social messages. The study identifies recurrent patterns in their representation by breaking down these legends into their fundamental elements. Some key oppositional structures examined include protection versus danger, where these ghosts serve as both protectors and threats, warning children about the consequences of disobedience. The parental neglect versus care binary is also evident, as Wewe Gombel acts as a surrogate parent to neglected children. At the same time, Hantu Kopek and Ame-onna reinforce parental authority through fear. Another key opposition is punishment versus redemption, as these supernatural figures do not merely terrorise but also serve corrective functions, such as returning abducted children once their parents learn a lesson (as seen in Wewe Gombel) or symbolising the existential sorrow of lost motherhood (as seen in Ame-onna). Through narrative deconstruction, the study examines how these supernatural figures encode cultural anxieties regarding child-rearing, discipline, and societal order (Freed-Thall, 2018).

The research involves multiple methodological steps. First, a literature review is conducted to collect folklore sources, ethnographic studies, and historical texts related to these supernatural beings. Second, a comparative analysis identifies common motifs, thematic parallels, and cultural distinctions in their narratives. Third, a structuralist interpretation is applied to map binary oppositions and social functions, examining how these legends regulate behaviour and reinforce moral codes. Lastly, a thematic synthesis is performed to integrate findings, contextualising folklore as a tool for societal regulation and linking supernatural myths to contemporary concerns regarding child safety, family structures, and gender roles.

By deploying comparative literature and structuralist analysis, this study unveils the deep-seated anxieties and moral teachings embedded in the legends of Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna. It highlights how these myths, despite their cultural differences, collectively function as narratives of fear and discipline, ensuring the reinforcement of social norms related to parental responsibility and child welfare. Ultimately, this methodological framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how supernatural folklore reflects and shapes societal values across different regions.

Analysis

The supernatural entities Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna are deeply embedded in the folklore of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan, respectively. Each is a cautionary figure, reflecting societal anxieties about child safety and parental responsibility. By employing comparative analysis and structuralist theory, we can uncover these legends' underlying structures and cultural significances, revealing their unique cultural manifestations and shared thematic elements.

Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis examines cultural similarities and differences to understand how societies address common human concerns. In the case of Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna, each figure is associated with the abduction of children, serving as a deterrent against behaviours deemed undesirable within their respective cultures. The supernatural entities Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna are significant figures in Malaysian, Indonesian, and Japanese folklore, respectively. Each entity possesses distinct characteristics and symbolic meanings within its cultural contexts. This section examines their traits using a comparative folklore approach, drawing on previous academic studies.

Hantu Kopek (Malaysia)

Hantu Kopek, also known as Hantu Tetek, is a female supernatural entity in Malaysian folklore characterised by large, pendulous breasts. The legend describes her as abducting children and hiding them under her breasts, often as a means to discipline or punish wandering children. This tale is a cautionary narrative to prevent children from straying far from home. Skeat (1900) in *Malay Magic* explores various supernatural beings in Malay folklore, discussing how spirits like Hantu Kopek serve as instruments of moral instruction within traditional Malay communities. Similarly, Braginsky (2004) in *The Heritage of Traditional Malay Literature* provides an extensive overview of supernatural beliefs in Malay culture, emphasising their roles in reinforcing social norms.

Wewe Gombel (Indonesia)

Wewe Gombel is a well-known figure in Javanese and Indonesian folklore. She is described as a vengeful female spirit with long, sagging breasts who kidnaps children—especially those who are neglected or abused by their parents. However, rather than harming them, Wewe Gombel provides care and shelter, only returning them once their parents recognize their mistakes. This legend reflects the cultural emphasis on proper parenting and social accountability. Endraswara (2018) in *Folklor Nusantara* discusses the role of supernatural beings like Wewe Gombel in instilling values and promoting parental responsibilities within Indonesian communities. His work suggests that these legends serve not just as cautionary tales, but also as a means of reinforcing the social fabric.

Ame-onna (Japan)

Ame-onna, or "Rain Woman," is a spectral figure in Japanese folklore associated with rain and sorrow. She is typically depicted as a drenched, long-haired woman who appears during rainy nights and is believed to lure away or kidnap children. Some versions of the legend describe her as a mother who lost her child and is forever searching for them, while others portray her as a supernatural force that abducts wandering children. Reider (2003) in *Transformation of the Oni: From the Frightening and Diabolical to the Cute and Sexy* examines the evolution of Japanese supernatural entities, including the transformation of female spirits like Ame-onna in literature and media. Shiraishi (2006) in *Yōkai no Minzokugaku* also provides an ethnographic study of Japanese yōkai, offering insights into how figures like Ame-onna represent broader cultural anxieties about motherhood, grief, and loss.

Despite their cultural differences, Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna share common themes of child abduction, moral instruction, and parental responsibility. While Hantu Kopek and Wewe Gombel warn against child neglect and wandering, Ame-onna embodies sorrow and maternal grief themes. Each legend functions as a cultural mechanism to regulate behaviour, ensuring that children remain safe and that parents uphold their responsibilities. Drawing from the works of Braginsky (2004), Endraswara (2018), Reider (2003), Skeat (1900), and Shiraishi (2006), this review underscores how folklore remains an essential medium for preserving societal values and addressing communal fears.

While these entities serve a similar function in cautioning against specific behaviours, they also reflect the unique cultural contexts from which they emerge. Hantu Kopek emphasizes obedience and the dangers of the

night, Wewe Gombel highlights the consequences of parental neglect, and Ame-onna focuses on the perils of environmental elements and the importance of staying close to home.

Structuralist Analysis

Structuralism seeks to uncover cultural narratives' underlying structures by identifying binary oppositions. Applying structuralist analysis to these legends reveals several key oppositions. The first is safety vs. danger, where each legend juxtaposes the home's safety with the dangers that lurk outside. The supernatural entities embody external threats that prey upon children who venture beyond the protective boundaries of their homes. The second is obedience vs. disobedience, where the narratives emphasise the importance of obedience to parental authority. Children who disobey and wander off are punished by abduction, reinforcing the value of adherence to societal norms and parental rules.

Another key opposition is parental care vs. neglect, particularly evident in the Wewe Gombel legend. There is a clear opposition between responsible parenting and neglect, where the spirit's abduction of neglected children serves as a critique of parental failure and a call for greater accountability. Finally, there is natural vs. supernatural, where the legends contrast the natural world with the supernatural, using otherworldly beings to personify societal fears and moral lessons. The supernatural abductions are metaphors for the real dangers associated with certain behaviours (Freed-Thall, 2018). The legends convey moral lessons integral to their respective cultures' socialisation processes through these binary oppositions. They instil values related to safety, obedience, and parental responsibility, using fear of the supernatural as a compelling motivator.

Supernatural Warnings as a Tool for Child Safety

In each of the three cultures examined, these supernatural figures instil fear-based lessons in children, discouraging them from engaging in behaviours that may lead to harm. The analysis highlights three primary warnings embedded in these myths. The danger of wandering off, seen in the legends of Hantu Kopek and Ame-onna, warns children to stay close to home. Hantu Kopek represents an unknown danger lurking at night, reinforcing children's need to stay close to their caregivers (Braginsky, 2004). Meanwhile, Ame-onna warns against wandering during bad weather, reflecting a Japanese cultural concern about environmental hazards and ensuring children's physical safety (Shiraishi, 2006).

The second warning concerns the consequences of neglect, as seen in Wewe Gombel. She acts as a social critique of negligent parenting in Javanese culture. Instead of harming children, she shelters those who have been mistreated or abandoned, emphasising the consequences of parental neglect (Endraswara, 2018). This legend functions as a corrective narrative, highlighting the importance of responsible and attentive parenting to prevent the loss of children. The third warning is the role of discipline and fear in parenting. All three supernatural figures reinforce the necessity of strict discipline in child-rearing, mainly through fear-based education. The binary oppositions (obedience vs. disobedience, safety vs. danger) in these legends reveal how folklore maintains social order by ensuring children internalise cultural norms about respect, caution, and submission to authority (Freed-Thall, 2018).

Supernatural Narratives as Mechanisms for Social Regulation

Through comparative and structuralist analysis, it becomes evident that these supernatural entities are not merely ghostly figures meant to evoke fear but regulatory tools societies use to enforce moral and social expectations. They function in several ways. First, these legends maintain discipline as a social control mechanism, ensuring children do not stray from acceptable behaviour while reinforcing parental authority. The fear of abduction is a psychological deterrent, reducing risky behaviours and promoting obedience. Second, as cultural lessons on family structure, these supernatural warnings reflect deep-rooted cultural attitudes toward parenting, emphasising protection, care, and discipline. The legends show that child-rearing is a personal duty and a communal responsibility, ensuring the next generation upholds moral values.

Lastly, these supernatural figures function as adaptive narratives for contemporary issues. As previous studies have shown, folklore continues to evolve, adapting to modern anxieties such as urbanisation, child

exploitation, and digital safety (Zamani et al., 2022). The persistence of these supernatural figures across generations indicates that the underlying fears they represent remain relevant, even as their interpretations shift with societal changes.

CONCLUSION

The legends of Hantu Kopek, Wewe Gombel, and Ame-onna demonstrate how supernatural folklore is integral to social regulation, reinforcing norms around child safety, parental responsibility, and community accountability. Through comparative analysis, we see how these figures share common themes of caution and discipline, though they manifest differently in their respective cultures. Structuralist analysis reveals the underlying binary oppositions reinforcing obedience, protection, and moral accountability. Ultimately, these supernatural narratives function beyond mere storytelling, serving as cultural tools for maintaining social order and ensuring that children grow up under the watchful care of responsible guardians.

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