

Research article

Political Polarization and Traditional Folktales: Examining Conflicts in the Legend of Mirah-Golan

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Abstract

The folktales of Mirah and Golan in Ponorogo, East Java, Indonesia, are deeply embedded with cultural and social values, reflecting political polarity closely linked to group conflicts and dynamics. This journal analyzes the political polarization depicted in these folktales by identifying the groups involved, their political ideologies, and the forms of conflict that emerge from these ideological divides. Using a qualitative approach and narrative analysis, the study explores the underlying meanings and messages within the tales of Mirah and Golan. The analysis reveals that these folktales illustrate conflicts and group dynamics resulting from divergent political perspectives. These narratives highlight the political polarization experienced by communities within the stories and echo similar phenomena observed in contemporary political landscapes. By examining these folktales, the research sheds light on how historical and cultural narratives can mirror and inform our understanding of current political issues, providing valuable insights into the nature of political conflicts and group interactions in historical and modern contexts.

Keywords

Folktales; Mirah and Golan; Political Polarization; Ponorogo; Traditional Narrative

Article history

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1. INTRODUCTION

Around the 1440s, during the early period of Ponorogo, now a regency in the East Java province of Indonesia, a legendary tale became an intriguing addition to the region's history. The tale began as Joko Lancur, the son of Ki Ageng Honggolono, leader of Karang Village, initially wished to have his yellow rooster fight (Nawawi, 2017). However, the rooster fled towards Mirah Village (now part of a hamlet in Nambangrejo Village, Sukorejo District of Ponorogo). At the same time, Siti Amirah, the daughter of Shidiq Muslim, also known as Ki Ageng Mirah, was busy weaving cloth at her home. Unexpectedly, Joko's rooster arrived at Mirah's house, therefore Joko's search for the rooster stopped when he was captivated by Mirah's beauty. He instantly desired to make Mirah his wife, but faced Ki Ageng Mirah's challenge: to irrigate all the rice fields in Mirah Village within a single night (Istanti Fatkhul Janah, 2021).

Joko's father, Ki Ageng Honggolono, agreed to this condition. That night, somehow, Joko quickly dammed the Sekayu River to irrigate all the fields in Mirah Village (Fuadi, 2023). However, Ki Ageng Mirah was not easily satisfied and added a new condition: Joko's family had to bring a granary filled with soybeans that could fly. Feeling mocked, Ki Ageng Honggolono replaced the contents of the granary with straw, placing the soybeans only on top (Prasetya, 2017). Furthermore, Ki Ageng Mirah, a devout believer, realized that Ki Honggolono's wealth came from black magic. Refusing to submit, she prayed to God. By God's power, the wealth displayed by Ki Honggolono turned back into dirt and stones. Feeling humiliated, Ki Honggolono attacked Siti Amirah and caused her death. Devastated by the loss of Siti Amirah, Joko Lancur took his own life to join his beloved. The two were then buried in Mirah, at a place now known as Setono Wungu (Febriansyah & Sanusi, 2020).

The death of his son only deepened Ki Honggolono's wrath. He issued a curse: the descendants of Mirah were forbidden from planting soybeans, the residents of Golan were prohibited from using straw for roofing, and both villages were forbidden from marrying each other or exchanging crops. This curse sparked a bloody feud between Golan and Mirah that lasted for years, claiming many lives (Hariyono & Santoso, 2021). However, a mysterious voice warned Ki Honggolono to end the conflict. The voice likened their feud to a cucumber fighting a durian, implying it was futile, as Golan was weaker. Nowadays, though some believe in the myth and others do not, the people of both villages still hold it respectfully, viewing it as a way to protect themselves from potential misfortune (Hariyono & Santoso, 2021).

Folktales often reflect the social and political realities of their time. By analyzing political polarities in folktales, we can learn how people in the past understood and experienced political divisions. This can help us grasp the roots of current political conflicts and how they have evolved over the years (Nur Hamid et al., 2021). Folktales can also serve as effective tools for raising political awareness and encouraging discussions on important issues. By examining political polarities in folktales, we can inspire people to think critically about how politics affects their lives and how they can engage in the political process (Adolph, 2016).

This paper attempts to uncover the meanings and messages in the folktale of Mirah and Golan, particularly about political polarization. It explores the causes of this polarization, its impact on society, and the resolutions implemented to prevent ongoing conflict. The author will then reflect on these findings within the context of contemporary political life, especially in Indonesia, offering insights and references for addressing the current widespread political polarization (Widodo, 2018).

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach, allowing an in-depth exploration of the meanings and socio-cultural contexts embedded within the studied folktales. This approach offers flexibility in understanding the nuanced narratives and symbolic elements hidden within the folktales, providing a comprehensive analytical framework to examine group dynamics and political polarization reflected in these stories (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, the researcher can uncover social and political dimensions that are often not immediately apparent (Gumilang & Bimbingan, 2016). Thus, this qualitative approach enriches our understanding of folktales and reveals how these narratives can reflect and influence the social and political structures within a society (Darmanita & Yusri, 2020). This method also enables the researcher to capture the complexity of interactions between individuals and groups within specific cultural contexts, as well as to identify the elements that contribute to the construction of identity and power relations within that society (Santoso, 2022).

Data collection was conducted using field research methods. The research locations included the villages of Mirah and Golan in Ponorogo Regency where the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with key informants, in particular, the village heads and *kamiturwo* (head of hamlet) of each location. The interviews are pivotal as they should be consulted to obtain more detailed and comprehensive

information (Indrawan, Asep, 2017). The study aimed to gather insights related to issues relevant to the local context of both villages. The research period occurred in November 2023, providing ample time for thorough and accurate data collection. Such a processes are expected to yield significant findings for further studies (Firdausi, 2020). After collecting the data, the researcher analyzed it using narrative analysis techniques to provide a complete and coherent discussion of the issues at hand (Afan Faizin, 2020). Narrative analysis was employed to examine the stories in order to understand their meanings and interpretations, as well as to comprehend the conflicts and dynamics present within the narratives (Asfar & Taufan, 2019).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Groups in the Legend of Mirah and Golan

According to Sutrisno Hadi, the kamituwo of Mirah and Golan, Ki Ageng Honggolono, the father of Joko Lancur, was a respected figure and a follower of Hinduism. He served as the leader of Karang Village, now known as Golan Village (named after Ki Honggolono due to his renown), which is part of the Sukorejo District. Ki Ageng Honggolono was the brother of Ki Ageng Kutu, the ruler of the Wengker region, which later became the foundation of Ponorogo. To the east of Golan Village lied Mirah Village (now known as Nambangrejo Village), which Ki Ageng Mirah, the father of Amirah or Mirah, led. Ki Ageng Mirah was a trusted aide of Batoro Katong, whom was sent by Wali Sanga to carry out the expansion of the Demak Sultanate and the Islamization of the region (Dwijayanto & Rohmatulloh, 2018; Fuadi, 2023).

The conflict between Mirah and Joko Lancur represents the differing political views of the two village leaders. Ki Honggolono supported the old government in Wengker, while Ki Ageng Mirah supported the new Islamic government. As a result, the village of Mirah, led by Ki Ageng Mirah, fell into conflicts with the village of Golan, led by Ki Ageng Honggolono (Rofiq, 2017). This divergence in the leaders' opinions has led to polarization within both Mirah and Golan communities. The local population experiences symptoms of framing due to the leaders' differing views (Pertiwi et al., 2020). How leaders present the conflict to their followers can also influence how they respond and react to the situation. If the conflict is portrayed as normal and non-threatening, followers may respond more calmly and be more open to seeking solutions. However, if the conflict is presented dramatically or as an indication of failure, followers might react with anxiety or resistance (Firdausi, 2020).

In this case, the leaders represent differing views through conflict. The curses and insults exchanged by the two leaders provoke similarly negative responses from the villagers. As a result, the two villages, which initially had no tension, began to experience conflict throughout the entire population once their leaders clashed (Widodo, 2018). The oaths sworn by Ki Honggolono and Ki Ageng Mirah have directly impacted the residents' lives for centuries. Even nowadays, despite the lack of confrontation, traditional prohibitions which often fall into political polarization remain in effect (Beno et al., 2022).

Theoretically, political polarization refers to the real division within a population, characterized by various manifestations such as convergence or divergence in ideologies or party identifications on specific issues (Ahn, 2022). This division often leads to a situation where societal differences align along a single dimension, with individuals increasingly viewing and portraying politics and society in terms of "Us" versus "Them." (McCoy et al., 2018) The concept of political polarization extends beyond mere ideological differences between political parties and includes an increase in interpersonal separation between supporters of opposing parties (Bliuc et al., 2021). Polarization is an effect produced by framing public opinion. Framing theory highlights that politicians and public figures often use metaphors to frame controversial political issues, influencing public perception and understanding (Skrynnikova et al., 2017). Through carefully crafted statements and the selection of specific frames, political leaders can affect how the public views and interprets political issues, ultimately shaping public opinion (Johnson et al., 2017).

Political polarization in Indonesian folktales has become an intriguing subject of academic research. Studies highlight that Indonesian society exhibits higher levels of polarization than anticipated on certain policy issues, revealing significant differences in political views (Fossati, 2019). This polarization is further emphasized by research investigating the phenomenon of political polarization in the Indonesian news media landscape during the 2019 Presidential Election (Situngkir, 2021). Additionally, the research discusses the importance of Indonesian folklore in shaping national identity and values, referring to the rich tradition of communities across the archipelago (Novianti, 2022).

3.2. Forms of Conflict

After Joko Lancur's proposal failed, the two families became embroiled in a conflict, exchanging oaths and curses that are still believed by the local community

today (Risdiana et al., 2022). Ki Honggolono issued an oath that included five prohibitions: (1) residents of Golan are not allowed to marry residents of Mirah, (2) items such as wood, stones, water, and others from Golan cannot be brought to Mirah, and vice versa, (3) items from both villages cannot be combined, (4) residents of Golan are prohibited from using straw to make roofing, and (5) residents of Mirah are forbidden from planting or making things from soybeans (Winarno, 2014; (Febriansyah & Sanusi, 2020). Meanwhile, Ki Ageng Mirah stated that the residents of Golan would not be able to keep *kawul* (then a type of traditional currency) as it would immediately burn (Annas et al., 2019).

As a result, the community's political views became divided into two groups, even leading to social conflicts. To this day, the residents of both villages adhere strictly to the Golan-Mirah customs. These traditional prohibitions have created social boundaries that have the potential to cause conflict (Gobang, 2014). Belief in these myths remains strong among the people of both villages, and the prohibitions established since the event continue to be avoided by the residents in hopes of preventing misfortune from befalling them (Reiljan et al., 2024).

In the case of the villagers of Mirah and Golan, current political polarization in Indonesia stems from political leaders depicting their groups and opposing political groups as "black" and "white" (Jati, 2022). Consequently, this understanding is perpetuated by their supporters and, with the aid of social media, spreads rapidly throughout society. As a result, public opinion towards various political groups or parties becomes polarized (Mansyur, 2023).

The outcome is a society divided into two opposing poles. Persistent confrontations characterize the political landscape in Indonesia, with the public becoming increasingly susceptible to provocative hate speech (Irawan, 2018). Each side defends its views and promotes its ideas to its supporters, leading individuals to "buy into" the perspectives that align with their criteria (Jamilah & Wahyuni, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis concludes that the legend of Mirah and Golan portrays the emergence of conflict and group dynamics rooted in political differences between two village leaders, Ki Honggolono from Golan and Ki Ageng Mirah from Mirah. These differences lead to political polarization between the two villages, symbolizing a broader pattern of political conflict that mirrors contemporary political polarization,

particularly in Indonesia. The division between these leaders reflects the ideological and power struggles in real-life political scenarios, illustrating how local folklore can be a medium for understanding deeper societal issues. The political tensions between the villages in the story resonate with today's increasing polarization, where competing ideologies clash and divide communities. This polarization, exacerbated by identity politics and amplified by social media and political elites, has divided society into opposing camps, often resulting in heightened tensions and unresolved conflicts. The legend of Mirah and Golan reveals how political narratives can shape public opinion and foster division, just as modern media narratives influence contemporary political landscapes. Therefore, this story holds critical lessons for addressing today's political challenges, emphasizing the need for greater understanding and dialogue to bridge ideological divides and promote unity. By reflecting on these folktales, society can draw insights into the dangers of polarization and work towards creating more inclusive and cooperative political solutions.

STATEMENT

The authors declare that they share equal contribution to the final manuscript and have no conflict of interest.

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