

THE EXAMPLE OF MEDIA CONSTRUCTION: THE MURDER CASE OF “ACHMAD SURAJI”

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Abstract

When the Indonesian police coincidentally broke up this case, no one realized how bizarre this case was. In fact, a con-man acting as the traditional “witch” healer in Medan, North Sumatra, had attracted 42 ladies with his invitation concerning the possibility of having a rich and caring husband or being promoted in their workplace. He admitted to the police of having killed all of the ladies

Despite the fact the police had found only 25 bodies, merely half of the number claimed, Achmad Suraji can still be depicted as one of the most heinous murderers in the history of crime. However, what does the world eventually know about him?

This paper provides evidence, with some illustrations, leading to the conclusion that his background as a non-English language country resident limits the possibility of him being described as the most sadistic serial murderer in the world. Whatever efforts were undertaken to increment the memorabilia on his criminal activity, the media didn't help by building him up to be as equally sadistic as Jack the Ripper or Samuel Berkowitz.

Background

Achmad Suraji (or his alias, *Dukun Datuk*) was basically an ordinary Indonesian person: uneducated, rather poor and at the same time proud of his anachronistic way of life. He lived in a poor suburb off Medan, the capital city of North Sumatra province, Indonesia. His informal position as “security chief” in his block (or *ketua keamanan lorong*) contributed nothing to making him a famous, widely known person outside his neighborhood.

So, there must be something extraordinary that Achmad had achieved following his new recent situation as a “public figure”.

In 1997, news regarding his arrest suddenly circulated throughout his neighbourhood. Almost none of the people who knew Achmad believed the

reason told by the police following the decision to arrest him and his wife. Rather than becoming suspicious about Achmad as a criminal, people close to him regarded him as a generous man always ready to help out anyone superstitious enough to believe in the reality of his power.

Long before his arrest, he was indeed known as a traditional healer and a witch at the same time. Despite the fact that he had insufficient educational background, people (sometimes guests driving luxurious cars visited him) seemed believe in the practice of occultism he was engaged in. No wonder Achmad once admitted he had inherited a power to help out people with a wide range of problems, such as the problem of finding new job, a higher position in their career, of being a

success in business, of finding a partner for life *et cetera* (see PPITK Report, 1999).

Amongst his guests was a number of young ladies. They all hoped Achmad could help them find a husband or give them good jobs. Since the ladies generally came from places far from Medan, the news regarding their disappearances right after concluding a visit to Achmad seemed unclear. Even, people who lived close to Achmad's house never realized that.

What made it worse, only a few relatives of the ladies who went missing had notified the police, especially that station situated close to Achmad's residence. Having no idea of where to go, others had notified the police in other stations close to where they lived. Bad communication between the police and the difficulties experienced in linking up the reports gathered by the police from several stations had clearly given a long interval (about ten years) for this serial killer to continue undetected. He admitted the killings started in 1986.

What actually happened, according to the police, was that Achmad persuaded his victim to be half-buried as one of several prerequisites for the fulfillment of the client's wish. Right after the lady had entered the hole Achmad had already prepared, Achmad (sometimes one of his wives, Tumini, also helped) killed her by hitting her with a big stick until she was dead. The hole then served the function of the burial place for the lady.

This horrible rampage of Achmad ended when one of his victims was not actually dead when buried. Having her body all covered in blood, this lady dug herself out from the inside, crawled up and sneaked out of the wide courtyard used by Achmad to kill all his victims. At the same time, the surviving lady's kin coincidentally reported to the police about the missing lady and told

the police exactly where the lady had gone on the last day she was seen.

The police became suspicious and in a raid on Achmad's house and his courtyard had found sufficient evidence in the form of the victim's possessions. Although Achmad admitted he had committed the murder of 50 women (in fact,, there were 42 women reported missing), in reality, the police could finally find only 25 of the remaining bodies of the victims.

Murder as a story

When the death sentence was finally passed on Achmad Suraji by the district court of Lubukpakam, Deli Serdang, North Sumatra Province, the audience packing the courtroom cheered and clapped their hands in jubilation. People seemed to regain a sense of justice which had seemingly been subverted by Achmad through what he had done with those dead ladies.

So the impression gained was that the audience had won the battle against their own feelings that Achmad had made a very serious mistake and deserved a harsh punishment. The fact that the audience didn't personally know who all the victims were didn't prevent them from being on the victims' side.

In addition, such memories relating to the misery caused to all the victims, the pain and the crying just before their last breath seemed to disappear after the verdict was read out. The courtroom had really changed from the saga of the victims losing their lives to another description on how justice must be enforced through its legal rituals.

A similar transformation of the sadistic Achmad Suraji and the misery he had brought might also have taken place when he was portrayed in the media long before his trial. Since the news of his activities had broken out around the first quarter of 1997, the

Indonesian mass-media had competed with one another in displaying all aspects relating to this case.

Whilst only a few articles explored the misery endured by all the victims, at first, the majority of the journalists were keener to discover who Achmad Suraji was and his ability to commit such an atrocity. Achmad was then described as someone full of paradox: soft but sadistic, uneducated but intelligent, submissive but demanding, poor but polygamous.

What was interesting was that although Achmad was named either as “butcher”, “mass murderer” or “the most sadistic person”, the way the media explored him was, in fact, not so fierce. The unavailability of heroic and macho symbolism upon him just helped him from being casted out by the media. In fact, his modest — tiny — almost ruined house was exactly the indicator used by the media people in determining how they should exploit him verbally.

There are two problems to be found here: either the media was having difficulties in exploring the negative, controversial or blameful aspect of Achmad or the media itself had unconsciously created a barrier for itself to get as close as possible to the target.

Regarding the first above, Achmad seemed to have an ordinary life that contrasted in our imagination with the life of a serial murderer. Even the theory of the organized murderer indicates such an association should be found within the details of a murderer’s life. This was supposed to be a selling point in the eyes of media as it supported a classic media theory regarding “man bites dog would be good news, but not the reverse”. However, the media had, in fact, thought a different way. Was there a possibility that the media expected something more bizarre and psychopathic-like in Achmad’s life?

In terms of the second, still relating to the first inconsistency found with respect to Achmad and his life, the media (especially the ones which published in Medan, North Sumatra) were deterred from reporting his case so frequently. There might also be another situation — having the media not take sides, especially Achmad’s side (it could make the people angry).

So, after a period of time, Achmad’s story seemed to be forgotten, no one publicised it anymore and his case was deliberately treated similarly to an ordinary criminal’s. News about him once more glittered when he was on trial.

Despite that, there was an investor in 1988 who thought it would be beneficial to have this case filmed. This investor might have thought people would like to see the movie as they would feel empathy for the fate of victims and then curse the killer as a consequence. This film was not successful in the end in the sense that people, in fact, were not eager to see the movie.

Another explanation for this was that the film failed to develop a movie that provided multiple versions of what had actually happened; at least, what was perceived by the killer in relation to what had actually happened. Research carried out by Epstein (1995) indicated there was a difference between the real and factual violence that had occurred at the crime scene and how it was imagined through the mass-media’s point of view.

So, when the pictures of the movie had no different (or additional) points of view compared with the police report, why bother going to see the movie?

Media Barrier

Making a comparison of the Achmad Suraji’s case with some other murder story, his case is undoubtedly

contestable against David “son of Sam” Berkowitz, Ted Bundy, Andrei Chikatilo or other murderers included in a long list of names produced by the media. Whilst all those names are Westerners, Indonesians made an ironic joke that since the majority of Indonesians couldn’t perform at the international level, this country was still represented through Achmad’s horrible case.

In reality, is that the fact? My assumption on the media barrier is that the media (I define the media as either printed or audiovisual media with national or international-wide coverage) were having problems in representing this case in a similar manner to other murder cases. Consequently, Achmad is still a nobody compared to the murderers I have mentioned.

These kinds of problems could then be perceived as the work of media domination having English language media coming from Western countries. As those media determine the “flavour” of the news or stories that should be given to the audience throughout the world, it depends entirely on them whether or not to deploy the resources to cover a local and non-English-language story coming from a third world country such as Indonesia.

Having a predominant position as effected by the unbalanced flow of information between the Western part and the rest of the world, these ruling groups of the Western media would tend to assert their dominance over and over again on a day-to-day basis, towards any topics that could be classed as popular culture (Tester, 1994; p. 16). By mentioning that, a conclusion could have been extracted that popular culture is, in fact, Western-dominated culture.

It is argued that such a discussion above is the only satisfactory reason that could explain, for example, the intensity of the media coverage of the *Unabomber Case* during 1978–1998

which ended up exaggerating that case (see Harrison, 1999).

Conclusion

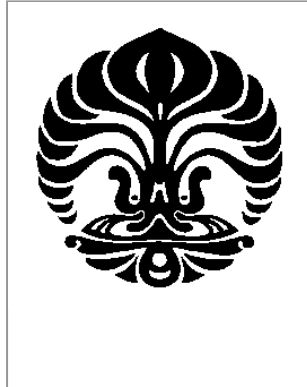
The whole body of the explanation found above can actually be regarded as an illustration of two substantial discourses.

First, people (especially the media) need some sort of pattern for understanding a phenomenon. A phenomenon which emerges out of a previous pattern would be regarded as ambiguous rather than something unique.

Second, the media barrier, in fact, occurs anytime. Even in terms of publicising a serial murderer, there is still such a politic of representation taken by the Western media in the form of filtering which one they like and how many resources they would deploy.

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