

The Visualization of FGM Tradition Symbol in the Film *Wuk* and Women's Reception

Achmad Rezi Fahlevie^{1*} Ranang Agung Sugihartono²

^{1,2} Master's Program in Arts, Postgraduate School, Indonesian Institute of the Arts Surakarta, Indonesia

*E-mail of the corresponding author: rezifahlevieachmad@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines how the film *Wuk* represents the symbolic traditions of female genital mutilation (FGM) within the context of Javanese culture and how women interpret these symbols through a reception approach. The research employs an artistic method combining visual semiotic analysis and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to explore the meanings of symbols from cultural, spiritual, and experiential perspectives of women. The findings reveal that visual symbols such as the coconut, *tumpeng* (cone-shaped rice offering), red rose, *dupa*, and *ani-ani* (traditional harvesting knife) carry multiple layers of meaning not merely as aesthetic elements but also as representations of power, purity, resistance, and female bodily awareness. The coconut symbolizes maternal affection and loss; *tumpeng* reflects power relations and intergenerational conflict; the red rose signifies spirituality and suffering; *dupa* represents purification and the pressure of tradition; while *ani-ani* embodies both control and women's resistance to the cultural constraints. The variety of audience receptions demonstrates that female viewers are not passive but actively reinterpret the cultural symbols in relation to the body and autonomy. Overall, film *Wuk* succeeds in creating an ethical visual reflection space and poetic, that bridges the dialogue between aesthetic and tradition.

Keywords: Visual symbols; Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); film *Wuk*; Women's reception; Javanese culture.

DOI: 10.7176/ADS/115-08

Publication date: December 30th 2025

1. Introduction

The practice of female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM), remains a phenomenon in various parts of the world, including Indonesia. Although it is often associated with tradition or religion, this practice is largely sustained by social and cultural constructs that emphasize female purity, sexual control, moral obedience, and readiness for adulthood. Several provinces in Indonesia such as West Java, North Sumatra, and East Java record relatively high practice rates, indicating that female circumcision continues to be regarded as a sacred ritual that must be performed within certain communities (Nantabah et al., 2015). A similar phenomenon is confirmed by Handayani et al. (2020), who emphasize that socio-cultural traditions play a dominant role in the practice of female circumcision in rural societies. Moreover, religious claims frequently linked to this practice are not supported by authoritative Islamic teachings; according to contemporary Islamic teachings, female circumcision is not a religious obligation, but rather a cultural practice rooted in local traditions (Gomaa, 2013). This indicates that the pressure to perform female circumcision originates primarily from cultural norms and social expectations within the community, rather than from legitimate religious imperatives. Therefore, educational and advocacy efforts must emphasize socio-cultural aspect alongside women's rights.

From a health perspective, female circumcision poses serious risks to women, both physically and psychologically. The cutting of genital organs particularly the clitoris can lead to sexual dysfunction, chronic pain, urinary tract infections, menstrual disorders, and even infertility. Psychological trauma, including fear of sexual relations, shame, and a diminished quality of life, is also commonly experienced. The lack of medical education and culturally based advocacy remains a key factor sustaining the practice, especially in rural areas where female circumcision is still viewed as a symbol of purification and a rite of passage into womanhood (Dave et al., 2011). This perspective reinforces that the persistence of female circumcision is rooted more in socio-cultural not in religious or legal dimensions, thereby suggesting that visual representations in media must remain sensitive to such contextual complexities.

As a visual art medium, film possesses a strategic capacity to open spaces for critical reflection related to controversial practices. One effective approach is symbolic visualization through the use of silhouette techniques, in which the human body and actions are depicted ambiguously. This method allows viewers to perceive multiple layers of meaning without presenting explicit or exploitative imagery. Such visual ambiguity is

rooted in the phenomenon of *bistability*, which enables the same figure to be perceived differently depending on the observer's perspective (Papathomas & Bono, 2004). In the cinematic context, *bistability* creates a dynamic interpretive space in which a visual symbol does not possess a singular meaning but instead opens multiple possibilities for reinterpretation based on each viewer's personal experience, cultural background, and psychological framework. According to Arnheim (1974), film has the capacity to convey inner conflicts, social tensions, and moral dilemmas symbolically through expressive visual composition. Meanwhile, Balázs (1924) emphasizes that bodily expression, gesture, and visual language in film can function as symbolic forms that communicate deep meaning while maintaining ethical sensitivity in the representation of women's bodies. The silhouette technique in film *Wuk* is employed to represent the female protagonist's inner conflict and moral dilemma. This strategy enables viewers to grasp the symbolic meaning without exposing the body explicitly, thereby preserving sensitivity toward victims while opening a critical space for audiences reflection.

Historically, the use of silhouettes in cinema demonstrates this technique's capacity to convey complex layers of meaning. Lotte Reiniger's silhouette animation *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) utilizes shadow and abstract form to merge reality and fantasy while expressing emotion and narration through nonverbal means (Happ, 2004). Through the silhouette technique, figures and body movements become symbolic media that communicate tension, ambiguity, and conflict without displaying explicit violence. This approach is highly relevant for representing female circumcision, as it allows the body to be treated as a symbol rather than an object of exploitation. In film *Wuk*, the use of silhouettes represents female circumcision as a symbol of tension between tradition, violence, sacredness, and hidden trauma. Visual composition, lighting, and color are carefully designed to obscure the center of action, creating an atmosphere of tension and full of uncertainty. This approach allows female audiences to interpret the symbolic representation of circumcision reflectively, fostering an understanding of social pressure, cultural control, and psychological wounds associated with this tradition practice. Such visual techniques not only convey narrative meaning but also facilitate audiences emotional resonance, enabling the film to function as a symbolic dialogic space between individual experience and broader socio-cultural constructions.

Symbolic visualization through silhouettes enables the exploration of ethical and aesthetic dimensions simultaneously. Viewers can perceive dual meanings within each scene, allowing the film to become a powerful medium of critical reflection. The symbolic approach in film *Wuk* also highlights the role of women as active interpreters. The silhouette technique provides a space for them to interpret the social and psychological conflicts evoked by female circumcision in accordance with their own experiences, knowledge, and perceptions. This aligns with the notion that film is not merely a form of entertainment but also a medium of education, social critique, and cultural expression. Symbolic visualization fosters open dialogue on the practice of female circumcision, challenges harmful traditional norms, and offers an ethical and reflective form of representation. This study therefore places symbolic visualization as its central focus: how film *Wuk* visualizes the symbols of female circumcision traditions and how female viewers interpret and respond to these visual symbols?

2. Method

This study employs an artistic research method with an emphasis on symbolic analysis to examine how the film *Wuk* represents the practice of female circumcision through metaphorical visualization. The film is positioned as an expressive medium that does not merely document reality but constructs meaning through aesthetic composition. As Arnheim (1974) states, visual processing in film has the capacity to express inner conflict and social tension, while Balazs (1924) emphasizes that bodily expression and gesture can function as a symbolic language revealing emotional depth and ethical dimensions. In film *Wuk*, visual elements such as silhouettes, lighting, color, and composition serve not only as aesthetic devices but also as symbolic means to communicate the moral dilemmas experienced by the characters. The silhouette technique is adopted not merely as a visual style but as an ethical strategy to depict the body as a symbol rather than as an object of exploitation. Furthermore, the use of traditional cultural symbols is approached through a reinterpretative artistic strategy. As stated by Aji and Sugihartono (2025), "Sanggit is the filmmaker's creative freedom to reinterpret traditional art values into new symbolic meanings" In this regard, *Wuk* transforms ritualistic objects and cultural gestures into new metaphorical articulations that challenge normative beliefs surrounding the body of young girls. Each symbol is analyzed as a metaphor representing social pressure, cultural control, and psychological trauma aligned with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) notion that metaphor is a conceptual tool enabling humans to comprehend abstract experiences through symbolic representation. This artistic analysis thus positions the film not only as a visual artwork but also as a space of critical reflection that interweaves aesthetics, women's lived experiences, and broader socio-cultural discourse.

A reception approach involving six female participants was employed to understand how the visual

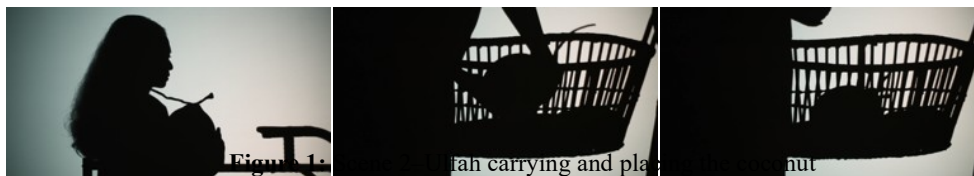
symbols in the film *Wuk* are perceived, interpreted, and responded. Participants were selected purposively based on their experiences, age, and socio-cultural backgrounds, using a semi-structured guideline that emphasized perceptions of symbols, emotional reactions, and reflections on the practice of female circumcision. This approach aligns with Hall's (1980) notion that the meaning of a film is constructed through the audience's active interpretation, which may take hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional positions. It is further expanded by Morley (1992), who highlights the influence of social and cultural contexts in shaping audience reception. Jauss's (1970) concept of the *horizon of expectation* also serves as a theoretical basis for understanding how viewers bring their own experiences and normative frameworks to interpret a work of art. In addition, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted to capture the social dynamics of collective meaning-making. As Morgan (1997) and Kitzinger (1994) explain, interaction among participants can generate values, emotions, and reflections that may not emerge in individual interviews. Through cross-perspective discussion and interpretive analysis, this study seeks to uncover how the symbols and visualizations in film *Wuk* are received, debated, and differently understood by women from diverse life contexts, thereby enriching both artistic and socio-cultural readings of this film.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The short film *Wuk* originates from social and cultural issues surrounding the practice of female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM), which continues to exist within certain Indonesian traditions, including those of Javanese society. This practice is not only associated with medical or ritualistic aspects but can also be understood as a form of symbolic violence against the female body, legitimized in the name of culture, religion, and social morality. In Javanese tradition, the practice is known as *tetasan*, a symbolic rite intended to "purify" the female body from *suker* (impurity) as part of the transition to womanhood. Research shows that female circumcision is rooted in hereditary cultural traditions, as well as in the influence of religious and medical interpretations (Muawanah et al., 2018). Furthermore, international studies conducted in Java indicate that the practice functions not merely as a cultural ritual but also as a site of tension between traditional values and religious interpretations that legitimize it (Mertik & Bocko, 2014). This complexity positions female circumcision as a socio-cultural phenomenon that cannot be understood from a single perspective but must be viewed as the result of negotiation between tradition, religion, and modernity.

The tension between these three domains tradition, religion, and modernity is expressed through the visualization of cultural symbols. These symbols do not merely serve as aesthetic ornaments but also operate as semiotic signs that convey power, resistance, and defiance. The film *Wuk* visualizes these tensions through a range of cultural symbols such as the coconut, *tumpeng*, red rose (used in the *siraman* ritual), *dupa*, and *ani-ani*. Each of these symbols functions not only as an aesthetic element but also as a representational medium for negotiating power and resistance. Through this visualization, the female body emerges as a contested space where spirituality, culture, and symbolic violence intersect across generations.



(Source: Film *Wuk*, 2025, TC 00:01:29:11–00:01:35:05)

Figure 1, scene 2, the silhouette of Ulfah is shown carrying a coconut. The image evokes a poetic and emotional atmosphere: Ulfah's figure appears in shadow, her arms gently cradling the coconut. She slowly lowers her head and places the coconut into a rattan basket, a gesture resembling that of a mother tenderly putting her child to sleep. This simple visual composition creates a striking contrast between the reality that she is holding only a coconut and the maternal imagination enveloping the scene.

The coconut functions not merely as a prop but as a symbolic baby representing the woman's relationship with Javanese ritual traditions. Its round and substantial shape makes it visually suitable to symbolize a baby, especially within the silhouette technique where the coconut appears distinct, solid, and easy to cradle. The coconut thus serves as an effective visual substitute to articulate a mother's dilemma regarding her child's body and future. Symbolically, a coconut whose husk has been peeled off is interpreted as representing a child who has undergone the *tetasan* ritual. The process of removing the husk from the shell is not merely a technical act, but also signifies the hope that the child will grow into a virtuous and socially valuable person

(Artista, interview in Kristanto, 2022). The peeled coconut suggests a transformation from something hidden to something considered “pure” and socially accepted.

Furthermore, the act of peeling the coconut can be interpreted as a symbol for exposure or self-unveiling, analogous to the experience of women undergoing the circumcision ritual. On one hand, it may symbolize purification or cleansing idealized by tradition; on the other, it implies a sense of loss embedded within the female body, as tradition intervenes even before a child can make a choice. Conversely, the intact coconut symbolizes a girl who has not undergone circumcision. The visual contrast between the husked and peeled coconut creates a powerful symbolic language, illustrating the dichotomy between what is “whole” and what has been “altered.” This scene not only portrays the silhouette of a mother and child but also opens a broader interpretive space for reflections on tradition, the body, and freedom.



Figure 2: Scene 17–Ulfah and Ibu Aswati performing the *tetesan* (tumpeng ritual)
(Source: Film *Wuk*, 2025, TC 00:17:53:19–00:17:58:22)

Figure 2, scene 17, the silhouettes of Ulfah and Ibu Aswati are shown performing the ritual of cutting the *tumpeng*. The scene is composed using a silhouette technique that produces a visual image both aesthetically striking and symbolically rich. The opposing silhouettes of the two figures emphasize the tension of power relations between generations tradition being both inherited and imposed. The *tumpeng* is not merely food but a sacred offering and an integral part of Javanese ritual practices. Typically made of rice shaped into a cone resembling a mountain. The mount form of the *tumpeng* represents the human relationship with the universe and symbolizes the spiritual journey of life from beginning to end. In Javanese cosmology, the mountain is considered a sacred, elevated place imbued with spiritual power; thus, the *tumpeng* carries symbolic values connecting humans with the divine.

The *tumpeng* is also regarded as a medium for conveying moral messages and ancestral wisdom through its physical form. As a ritual offering, it serves as a cultural device that embodies religious, social, and philosophical values. Amin et al. (2022) explain that within Javanese ritual contexts, the *tumpeng* functions as a symbolic expression passed down through generations. The selection of the *tumpeng* motif in film *Wuk* is therefore intentional it represents how tradition shapes yet simultaneously limits individual freedom, particularly that of women. Presented through silhouettes, the *tumpeng* highlights how tradition often manifests as a shadow that covers personal freedom. The act of slicing the tip of the *tumpeng* creates a powerful metaphor for the authority of tradition and cultural control. This scene depicts how crucial decisions regarding a girl’s body, life, and future are often made by others especially by older generations without her agreement. While the cutting of the *tumpeng* is conventionally interpreted as a gesture of blessing and prayer, in film *Wuk* it is reframed as a critique of cultural practices that robs women of their fundamental rights.

The scene not only highlights the ritual aspect of Javanese culture but also opens a critical space for reflecting on gender and power relations. Traditionally associated with goodwill and sanctity, the *tumpeng* here embodies ambivalence: on one hand sacred and meaningful, yet on the other, a metaphor for the authority that limits women. The symbol of the *tumpeng* calls for deep reflection on the intersections of tradition, authority, and gender justice, while simultaneously offering a space of resistance for the female protagonist to question and refuse repressive traditions.



Figure 3: Scene 18 – Ulfah and Ibu Aswati performing the *tetesan* (bathing ritual)
(Source: Film *Wuk*, 2025, TC 00:18:04:11–00:18:10:04)

Figure 3, scene 18, Ulfah and Ibu Aswati are depicted performing the *siraman* ritual, surrounded by red roses that fill the visual space. The presence of the roses carries profound emotional, spiritual, and symbolic meaning, connecting layers of human experience. In Javanese understanding, the word *mawar* (rose) is sometimes interpreted as a *bakronim* of *mawiarsa*, meaning “with will or intention,” symbolizing a person’s strong will in undertaking an action. Another interpretation reads *mawar* as a *bakronim* of *awar-awar ben tawar*, meaning “make your heart pure or sincere,” reflecting a Javanese moral teaching that everything we do should be performed with wholehearted sincerity and without expectation of reward.

The red color of the roses represents the process of human birth (*dumadine jalma manungsa*), which is why red roses are often associated with the figure of the mother the source where both body and soul are formed (Dewantoro, 2018). The red rose thus serves not merely as an ornament but as an ambivalent symbol: something precious, admired, and desired, yet also a contested object marked by tension and conflict. The use of the silhouette technique to depict Ulfah and Ibu Aswati enhances the scene’s dramatic and symbolic depth, visualizing their complex emotional dynamics both tender and strained. The atmosphere is further intensified by the accompanying musical score, which combines traditional Javanese elements with an undertone of tension. The emotional strain fused with the symbolism of the red roses imbues each drop of water and each falling petal with layers of meaning evoking birth, sacrifice, and the weight of cultural expectation.



Figure 4: Scene 19 – Ulfah and Ibu Aswati performing the Tetesan ceremony (Smudging ritual)
(Source: Film *Wuk*, 2025, TC 00:18:14:05–00:18:17:01)

Figure 4. scene 19 depicts Ulfah and Ibu Aswati standing face to face, both deeply absorbed in the sacred atmosphere of the ritual. Ibu Aswati holds a coconut, while Ulfah holds a burning *dupa*. Several sticks of *dupa* have been lit, their thin white smoke slowly rising into the air, swirling as if following the gentle direction of the wind. The presence of *dupa* introduces a strong spiritual dimension, for in Javanese culture, *dupa* is not merely a source of fragrance but a medium that connects humans with their ancestors and the unseen realm. Each curl of smoke is viewed as a prayer and a wish entrusted to higher power, a form of unspoken communication believed to transcend the boundaries of the visible world. In this context, *dupa* is not just an object but a symbol of purity, prayer, and spiritual transition (Pals, 2003). Its fragrance fills the space, creating an atmosphere of stillness, silence, and sanctity, affirming that every intention must be grounded in sincerity.

The emotional tone of the scene is further heightened by the accompanying music. Traditional Javanese instruments create a harmony that is both mystical and haunting. The music not only enhances the spiritual mood but also intensifies the emotional tension enveloping the relationship between Ulfah and Ibu Aswati. Through the combination of silhouetted visuals, rising *dupa* smoke, the symbolism of the coconut, and the tense of Javanese melody, this scene becomes a pivotal moment in the narrative revealing that ritual is not a simple act, but a space where culture, spirituality, and inner conflict converge. This scene shows how tradition can serve both as a bridge to the ancestors and as a battleground of meanings between generations, making every detail from the curling smoke to the lingering sound of music laden with profound symbolic and emotional weight.

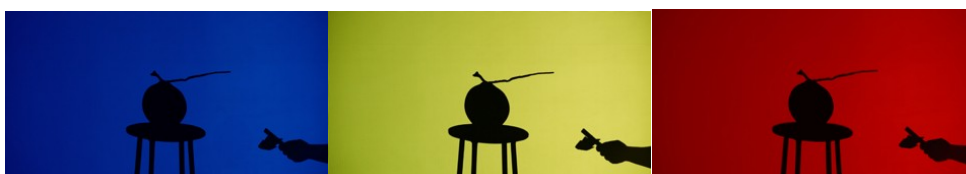


Figure 5: Scene 20 – The circumcison process performed by the traditional circumciser
(Source: Film *Wuk*, 2025, TC 00:18:45:24–00:18:46:12)

Figure 5. scene 20 shows a coconut approached by a hand holding an *ani-ani*. The *ani-ani* is a traditional rice-harvesting knife used across many regions in Indonesia that practice rice cultivation, such as Bali, Java, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, each with its local name. It consists of a small metal blade attached to a wooden

or bamboo handle that crosses diagonally (KBBI, 2023). The choice of the *ani-ani* in this scene represents more than just a traditional agricultural tool it carries symbolic resonance connected to the practice of female circumcision. In some traditions, similar tools are used in that ritual. The *ani-ani* thus embodies an ambivalence: on one hand, it symbolizes fertility and life through its agrarian function; on the other, it is associated with a practice that robs upon women's bodily autonomy.

Within the film, the *ani-ani* holds multiple layers of meaning. It reflects the enduring strength of traditional values that persist even as younger generations strive for change. In the context of female circumcision, the *ani-ani* also represents women's powerlessness and sacrifice, drawing attention to issues of human rights and women's protection. Here, the *ani-ani* can be seen as a marker of transition or transformation in the character's life, a symbol of resistance against constraining traditions, offering the possibility for female characters to choose their own path toward freedom and empowerment.

These layered interpretations suggest that the *ani-ani* is a contested symbol, representing both cultural heritage and women's struggles over their bodies. As Sugihartono, Kasiyan, and Adi (2024) argue, "integrating local cultural elements, such as folklore, into films is an effective strategy to enhance cultural identity and values." This premise underpins *Wuk*'s use of Javanese cultural symbols to reframe tradition in a humanistic and critical light. Consequently, the film does not reject Javanese culture; rather, it creates a space for reinterpretation that affirms dignity and safeguards girls' bodily rights as integral to their cultural identity.

3.2 Discussion

Figure 1, Scene 2 presents the silhouette of Ulfah cradling a coconut, rendered in a poetic visual composition rich with symbolic meaning. The coconut, treated as if it were a baby, serves as a powerful representation of a mother's inner struggle and the discourse surrounding women's bodies within Javanese tradition. The strength of this scene lies in its visual simplicity, which evokes deep emotion even though its meaning may be ambiguous to audiences who unfamiliar with the cultural context particularly in distinguishing between a husked and an unhusked coconut. This symbolism aligns with Roland Barthes's (1977) concept of visual semiotics, which identifies three layers of meaning denotation, connotation, and myth that function as signifiers of social values concerning purity and control over the female body. The interpretation also resonates with Laura Mulvey's (1975) ideas on how the female body in visual representation often becomes a site of tension between the forces of tradition and the woman's own subjectivity.

Based on the results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) held on Tuesday, October 7, 2025, female participants interpreted the coconut as a symbol of a child. This interpretation was influenced by the film's strong visual and auditory elements particularly Ulfah's gentle rocking motion accompanied by the sound of a baby's cry, which evokes a deep emotional response and reinforces maternal imagery. One FGD participant, Imtinan, stated: "The coconut symbolizes a baby girl, represented symbolically and emphasized through the scene and the baby's cry in the film. The complete coconut represents a pure newborn, while its transformation reflects the process experienced in the tradition of female circumcision." Participants expressed feelings of compassion and empathy, as if witnessing a mother comforting her child. The coconut thus carries complex meanings—not only as a symbol of maternal affection but also as a representation of loss and the inner conflict surrounding traditions that regulate women's bodies.

Figure 2. Scene 17 depicts the silhouetted figures of Ulfah and Ibu Aswati in a *tumpeng*-cutting ritual, presenting a visual that is both symbolically and emotionally powerful. The use of silhouette emphasizes the ambivalence between aesthetic beauty and moral tension, while also highlighting the power relation between two generations of women. The strength of this scene lies in its ability to convey conflict without dialogue through body gestures and culturally familiar symbols for Javanese audiences, though its limitation lies in the potential difficulty for viewers outside the cultural context to grasp its meaning. The symbolism of this scene aligns with Clifford Geertz's (1973) perspective that culture is a system of meanings expressed through public symbols. The *tumpeng* thus becomes a representation of a "web of meaning" that reflects the social and religious values of Javanese society, while simultaneously implying a power relation that places women in a subordinate position. Victor Turner's (1969) concept of ritual process and liminality is also relevant in explaining the scene's dynamics the act of cutting the *tumpeng*, positions Ulfah and Ibu Aswati in a liminal space between loyalty to tradition and the desire for change, making the *tumpeng* a symbolic field where sacred values and individual awareness intersect. Meanwhile, Stuart Ewen's (1988) theory of cultural representation helps to interpret the scene as a form of social communication that reveals how power operates through everyday symbols. In film *Wuk*, the *tumpeng* functions not merely as a tradition symbol but as an ideological instrument that normalizes women's obedience and sacrifice in the name of custom.

Based on the results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted on Tuesday, October 7, 2025,

most participants interpreted the *tumpeng* as a symbol of gratitude, suggesting that every difficult decision is accompanied by love and good intentions. One participant, Putri stated: “The *tumpeng* represents a form of gratitude that appears joyful.” However, several other female participants interpreted the *tumpeng* scene as a symbol of tradition that oppresses and restricts women’s choices. They viewed the moment of cutting the *tumpeng* as a metaphor for decisions made without involving those most affected the daughters. Thus, the *tumpeng* is not merely a ceremonial dish but a representation of power and relational inequality within the family, where women’s voices are often marginalized behind the sanctity of cultural symbols.

Figure 3. Scene 18 presents an intense visual composition dominated by the red color of roses filling the visual frame, creating a deeply spiritual and emotional atmosphere. Aesthetically, the scene successfully constructs a transcendental atmosphere between Ulfah and Ibu Aswati. The red roses serve not merely as decorative elements but as symbols of life, sacrifice, and an ambiguous form of love. The use of silhouette reinforces the inner emotional tension between the two, tender but strained, warm but wounded. The success of this scene lies in its ability to merge aesthetic value and local spirituality into a single poetic visual composition. Its weakness, however, lies in the potential density of symbolism, which may cause audiences unfamiliar with Javanese culture to perceive only surface beauty without grasping its deeper meanings. Carl Gustav Jung’s (1964) theory of archetypal symbols helps explain the rose as a feminine archetype representing birth, love, and the process of individuation the journey toward female self-awareness marked by pain and healing. Within cinematic context, Julia Kristeva’s (1980) concept of *abjection* is also relevant: the red roses and cleansing water form a symbolic space that portrays the female body as both sacred and morally conflicted, where love intermixes with guilt and submission to cultural norms.

Based on the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted on Tuesday, October 7, 2025, female viewers responded to this scene with varied interpretations. Most participants regarded the bathing ritual with red roses as the most beautiful and spiritual moment, depicting a mother’s love in purifying her child through prayer. One participant, Ningsih stated: “The red rose symbol in the bathing scene signifies the cleansing of both body and soul.” Other participants, however, interpreted the red roses and the ritual as symbols of suffering, blood, and pressure on the female body especially when paired with Ulfah’s tense expression. This diversity of responses illustrates that female audiences do not perceive the rose merely as an aesthetic symbol, but as a representation of complex emotional and social experiences surrounding the body, tradition, and power.

Figure 4. Scene 19 presents a powerful fusion of visuals and atmosphere through the use of *dupa* as the central element marking a spiritual transition. Cinematically, the strength of this scene lies in its ability to construct a sacred and meditative space without relying on dialogue. The slow movement of incense smoke through the air enhances the spiritual tone, illustrating the interconnectedness between the human world, the ancestors, and the divine. The silence, punctuated by traditional Javanese music adds an emotional layer, creating an ambience that feels both quiet and tense. The scene’s strength lies in its authentic integration of cultural and spiritual elements, while its weakness may be the symbolic repetition, as several signs (coconut, incense, silhouette) reappear, potentially making the symbolism feel overly dense in meaning for some audiences. Theoretically, this scene can be read through Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) *rites of passage* theory, which explains that rituals function as transitions process from one phase of life to another, often marked by purifying symbols such as smoke or water. The *dupa* here becomes a symbol of Ulfah’s transition between obedience and awareness, between the old world and the courage to resist constraining traditions. Mary Douglas’s (1966) *Purity and Danger* also provides a relevant framework, explaining how ritual acts and symbols of purity, like incense, serve to reinforce social and moral boundaries. In film *Wuk*, *dupa* smoke functions not only as a spiritual medium but also as a marker of cultural boundaries between women deemed “obedient” and those considered “deviant.”

Based on the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted on Tuesday, October 7, 2025, audience responses to the incense-burning scene revealed varied interpretations. Most female participants felt a sense of calm and deep spirituality; they perceived the incense as a symbol of prayer and Ulfah’s sincerity in seeking truth amid the pressures of tradition. The smoke was seen as creating a sacred atmosphere, representing the spiritual connection between humans and the divine. One participant, Puji stated: “The incense represents spirituality and sacredness in the *tetasan* ritual. The rising smoke feels like prayers spreading through the air, full of hope and help.” Other participants, however, viewed the combination of smoke and tense music as creating a sense of pressure and fear, suggesting that the ritual symbolizes the coercion women experience within tradition. For them, the incense smoke no longer signifies purity but becomes a subtle metaphor for the suppression of women’s bodies and wills. The symbol of incense in film *Wuk* thus embodies an ambivalence in meaning: on one hand representing both spirituality and sanctity, on the other hand exposing the social pressures imposed upon women within Javanese culture.

Figure 5. Scene 20 presents strong symbolism through the visual presentation of an *ani-ani* (a traditional rice-harvesting blade) placed near a coconut. Visually, this composition generates a tension between life and violence, between fertility and wounding. The power of this scene lies in its ability to mix the simple agrarian tools into complex metaphors for the body, tradition, and social control over women. Its weakness, however, lies in the degree of symbolic legibility without contextual knowledge, some viewers may find it is difficult to understand the connection between the *ani-ani* and the practice of female circumcision, so that the meaning overly implicit. However, the visual strength of the scene stands out through the symbolic contrast between the cutting tool and the round coconut, evoking a sharp and provocative imagery. Theoretically, the *ani-ani* symbol can be analyzed through Michel Foucault's (1977) theory of power and the body, which highlights how the body becomes a site of discipline and social control through culturally legitimized practices. The *ani-ani* is not merely a tool, but an ideological instrument representing the regulation and restriction of the female body.

Based on the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted on Tuesday, October 7, 2025, the female audience's reception of this scene revealed interesting differences. Most participants interpreted the *ani-ani* as a symbol of violence and fear, evoking the act of cutting in the context of female circumcision. One participant, Cintha stated: "The *ani-ani* symbolizes the cutting instrument, representing the act of wounding the female body within the ritual." Meanwhile, other participants viewed the *ani-ani* as a representation of women's strength and courage in facing oppressive traditions, signifying their attempt to reclaim control over their bodies and choices. Thus, the *ani-ani* in film *Wuk* embodies a dual symbolism: it evokes both the violence of ritualized oppression and the potential for female resistance and empowerment within a patriarchal cultural framework.

This study examines five main symbols in the film *Wuk*; the coconut, *tumpeng*, red rose, incense, and *ani-ani* as representations of the female body, tradition, and power within Javanese culture, using a visual semiotic approach and women's reception (Focus Group Discussion). The coconut symbolizes maternal love and inner struggle toward tradition; audiences interpret it as a sign of love, purity, and loss. The *tumpeng* depicts power relations and intergenerational conflict; some participants perceive it as a mother's prayer and blessing, while others see it as a symbol of patriarchal decisions that restrict women's choices. The red rose, interpreted through Jung's and Kristeva's theories, embodies the feminine archetype, signifying the female body as a sacred yet morally wounded space; audience responses are divided between readings of spirituality and suffering. The *dupa*, viewed through the frameworks of van Gennep and Douglas, represents spiritual transition and purification, while also revealing social boundaries between obedience and resistance. Meanwhile, the *ani-ani*, when examined through Foucault's theory of the body and power, reflects an ambivalence meaning between an instrument of violence and a symbol of women's awareness of their own bodies. Overall, film *Wuk* successfully constructs a rich and evocative layer of symbolism, offering dual interpretations between sacredness and oppression, between tradition and freedom. Findings from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) indicate that these symbols not only reinforce the film's social critique but also open new reflection spaces for female viewers to reinterpret the relationship between body, tradition, and power in contemporary Javanese culture.

4. Conclusion

The film *Wuk* shows that visual symbolism can serve as an effective medium for addressing the issue of female circumcision without depicting explicit violence. Through the symbols of the coconut, *tumpeng*, red rose, *dupa*, and *ani-ani*, the film represents the tension between tradition, the body, and women's subject within Javanese culture. These symbols reveal the intertwined relations between purity, sacrifice, and social control legitimized by custom. The film's use of silhouette techniques and metaphorical approaches provides viewers with broad interpretive space, fostering both emotional engagement and reflective awareness. Based on the findings of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), reception of female audiences exhibited diverse interpretations: some perceived the film's symbols as expressions of love and spirituality, while others viewed them as critiques of traditions that oppress women's body. This diversity of responses suggests that film *Wuk* functions not only as a media of artistic expression, but also as a social dialogue space that bridges aesthetics, ethics, and gender consciousness. The film *Wuk* succeeds in transforming a culturally taboo practice into a reflective visual discourse that integrates aesthetic values, spirituality, and critical awareness of women's bodily rights.

REFERENCES

- Amin, M.R. (2022), "Menyelami budaya membaca sejarah Desa Penataran dan konstruksi identitas (Exploring the reading culture of Penataran Village and the construction of identity)", *Baksooka: Jurnal Sejarah, Sosial dan Budaya (Journal of History, Society, and Culture)*, STKIP PGRI Pacitan.

- Arnheim, R. (1974), *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, University of California Press.
- Aji, F. & Sugihartono, R.A. (2025) ‘Kebaya Janggan and Emotional Narrative: Sanggit Reinterpretation in *Gadis Kretek*’, *Mudra Jurnal Seni Budaya*, 40(1), pp. 175–185.
- Balázs, B. (1924), *Visible Man*, Harcourt, Brace & Company.
- Barthes, R. (1977), *Image, Music, Text* (S. Heath, Trans.), Fontana Press.
- Dave, P., et al. (2011), “Health Consequences of Female Genital Mutilation”, *Journal of Women’s Health*, 20(4), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2010.2291>
- Dewantoro, S.H. (2018), *Sastrajendra Ilmu Kesempurnaan Jiwa (The Javanese Esoteric Philosophy of the Perfection of the Soul)*, Javanica.
- Douglas, M. (1966), *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge.
- Ewen, S. (1988), *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, Basic Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Pantheon Books.
- Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Basic Books.
- Gomaa, A. (2013), “The Islamic View on Female Circumcision”, *African Journal of Urology*, 19(3), 123–126. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.afju.2013.02.007>
- Hall, S. (1980), “Encoding/Decoding”, in Hall, S., Hobson, D., Lowe, A. & Willis, P. (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, Hutchinson, London, pp.128–138.
- Handayani, D., et al. (2020), “Sociocultural Dimensions of Female Genital Mutilation in Indonesia”, *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, 26(1), 45–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2020.1718681>
- Happ, L. (2004), “Silhouette in Early Animation: Lotte Reiniger and *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*”, *Journal of Animation Studies*, 2(1), 12–25.
- Jauss, H.R. (1970), *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation (Literary History as Provocation)*, Edition Suhrkamp Nr. 418, Suhrkamp.
- Jung, C.G. (1964), *Man and His Symbols*, Aldus Books.
- Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia. (2023), “Ani-ani (Traditional Sickle Knife)”, *KBBI Daring (Online Indonesian Dictionary)*, Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, Kemendikbudristek. <https://kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id/entri/ani-ani>
- Kitzinger, J. (1994), “The Methodology of Focus Groups: The Importance of Interaction Between Research Participants”, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 16(1), 103–121.
- Kristanto, Z. (2022, September 9), “Berkenalan dengan tetesan: Tradisi sunat untuk anak perempuan Jawa (Getting to know ‘tetesan’: The Javanese tradition of female circumcision)”, *Etnis*. <https://etnis.id/featured/berkenalan-dengan-tetes-an-tradisi-sunat-untuk-anak-perempuan-jawa/>
- Kristeva, J. (1980), *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press.
- Mertik, J. & Bočko, D. (2014), “Female Circumcision Between Tradition and Religion: A Case Study from Java, Indonesia”, *Anthropological Notebooks*, 20(3), 5–22.
- Morley, D. (1992), *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, Routledge.
- Morgan, D.L. (1997), *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.), SAGE Publications.
- Muawanah, S., Indriana, D. & Rahman, A. (2018), “Female Genital Mutilation in Indonesia: Between Tradition, Religious Belief, and Medical Practice”, *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, 5(4), 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v5i4.240>
- Mulvey, L. (1975), “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen*, 16 (3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
- Nantabah, Z.K., et al. (2015), “Determinan orang tua dalam perilaku sunat anak perempuan di Indonesia (Parental determinants in the practice of female circumcision in Indonesia)”, *Buletin Penelitian Sistem Kesehatan (Bulletin of Health System Research)*, 18(1), 77–86. <https://doi.org/10.22435/bpsk.v18i1.4299>
- Papathomas, T. & Bono, R. (2004), “Bistability and Multistability in Visual Perception”, *Perception*, 33(9), 1075–1089. <https://doi.org/10.1068/p5176>
- Pals, D. (2003), *Seven Theories of Religion*, Oxford University Press.
- Sugihartono, R. A., Kasiyan, & Adi, S. P. (2024). *Children’s Animation Films: The Cultural Advancement Perspective*. *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 29, 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.14456/jucr.2024.18>
- Turner, V. (1969), *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine Publishing.

First A. Author (Achmad Rezi Fahlevie) was born in Kendawangan, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. He received a Bachelor's degree in Communication Science (with a concentration in Broadcasting) from Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia. At the time this article was published, he was pursuing a Master of Arts degree at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Surakarta, Indonesia. His creative and research interests focus on the production of short fiction films, documentaries, and experimental cinema.

Second A. Author (Ranang Agung Sugihartono) was born in Blitar, East Java, Indonesia. He completed his Bachelor's studies at IKIP Malang, his Master's degree at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), and his Doctoral degree at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Surakarta. He is currently a lecturer at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Surakarta, Indonesia. His research interests include art and cultural studies, media development, and contemporary artistic practices. He is actively involved in seminars, workshops, and scientific publications at both national and international levels.