

Germany's Interest in Indonesia: Postcolonial Analysis of the Documentary Film *Riders of Destiny*

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ABSTRACT

This research critically examines *Riders of Destiny* (2019), a German documentary film about the pacoa jara, a horse racing tradition in Sumbawa, Indonesia, focusing on its portrayal of child exploitation. The film highlights the risks to child jockeys, such as injury and interrupted education, framing the practice as a violation of children's rights. However, it oversimplifies the issue by neglecting the tradition's historical, cultural, and economic context. Using postcolonial theory to analyse the film's content, concept, and context, this research explores how the documentary reflects German interests in shaping global perceptions of non-Western cultures. The film's content, shaped by selective interviews and imagery, emphasises the negative aspects of the practice, while its concept frames the tradition as a moral failure in need of reform. The context is largely ignored, with the film overlooking pacoa jara's cultural significance within local communities and its role in family economics and social identity. This research concludes that *Riders of Destiny* serves as a tool for promoting Western child protection ideologies, positioning Germany as a moral authority while marginalising local cultural perspectives. This research does not intend to support child exploitation but rather seeks to explore how the practice of child jockeying is culturally perceived by the local community, which cannot be understood in a singular, Westernised way. Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature on postcolonial theory by uncovering how media perpetuates modern forms of cultural influence that sustain postcolonialism.

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INTRODUCTION

The late 20th century marked the emergence of the decolonisation movement as many colonies in Asia, Africa and Latin America gained their independence. With the independence of numerous colonies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the late 20th century, the decolonisation movement began to take shape. Moreover, postcolonialism became prominent among non-Western scholars and activists. This perspective shows that despite the end of colonialism, these forms of colonisation have continued to evolve (Ponzanesi, 2018). The legacy of postcolonialism is not only seen in political and economic aspects but also extends to the unnoticed or invisible aspects, such as culture (Young, 2012). This approach allows Western to conserve its hegemonic worldview and values to the exclusion of non-Western perspectives (Young, 2012). In this study, Young's framework provides a critical lens to examine how film cinematic narratives perpetuate Western ideologies and marginalise non-Western.

In the contemporary era, film remains a potent medium through which the legacies of postcolonialism persist. It subtly embeds colonial ideologies even as the global film industry increasingly advocates for decolonising values. Despite these progressive trends, films often replicate and amplify stereotypes originating from colonial viewpoints. It casts non-Western characters in roles that emphasise their exoticism, primitiveness, or portrayal as passive recipients of Western

intervention. For instance, in many Hollywood films, Indigenous characters are often depicted as uncivilised, and in need of saving by Western protagonists. These emphasise the Native Americans as ‘otherness’ rather than their complexity as individuals. As Ponzanesi (2018) argues, a central function of film has historically been to perpetuate stereotypes and propagate misrepresentations of the cultures and people from former colonies, reinforcing power imbalances established during the colonial era. By interpreting narratives through a colonial gaze, the film reinforces dominant Western ideologies. It frames non-Western subjects as “The Other,” which normalises and justifies historical structures of power and exploitation between West and non-West. Moreover, it shapes perceptions about non-Western societies in ways that continue to privilege Western viewpoints (Weaver-Hightower & Hulme, 2014). Western production of films about former colonies determines the narrative and the way local cultures are perceived, often without involving the voices or perspectives of the local communities (Diaz-Sanz, 2022). In this sense, many of the film works are still caught up in the ongoing colonial legacies and carry the vested interests and cultural hegemony of the West (Tsabithah, Lie & Izziti, 2022).

The Western portrayal of non-Western countries has long stirred controversy, particularly in documentary films, where the objective is ostensibly to capture an unembellished version of reality and present an accurate depiction of events or situations. Documentary filmmaking requires a comprehensive understanding and sensitivity toward the portrayed issues (Coleman, 2023). In this respect, Western-produced documentaries representing non-Western subjects are frequently critiqued as potentially inappropriate and inherently problematic. Western filmmakers are often accused of disregarding intimate engagement with their subjects, simplifying intricate phenomena, and framing these representations within Western-centric perspectives. They often fail to integrate local viewpoints adequately (Fajar, 2024). This indicates that Western filmmakers intentionally support the dominant ideology of the West by highlighting non-Western societies as “different” from the West (Fajar, 2024).

This study analysed the interest of Germany in the documentary *Riders of Destiny* (2019) from a postcolonialism perspective. The film was produced by German filmmakers and aims to capture the Indonesian landscape. It captures the tradition of horse racing (*pacoa jara*) in Sumbawa, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. With the subject of a child horse rider named Sila, the film highlights the issue of child labour and the exploitation of children's rights linked to poverty within the family (Niermann, 2019). Unfortunately, this narrative does not consider the local contexts of Sumbawan, such as local history and culture. Therefore, this study seeks to further interrogate patterns of colonial discourse present within the *Riders of Destiny*, specifically examining Germany's socio-political and cultural interests in Indonesia as articulated through these works. Therefore, the research question of this study is “*How is Germany's interest in Indonesia seen from the postcolonialism perspective through the film Riders of Destiny?*”

METHODS

This study used qualitative methods with the data collection from journals, articles and books. The data was analysed using narrative analysis. Therefore, this study utilised a postcolonialism lens to reveal the underlying cultural influences portrayal of German intentions in Indonesia in *Riders of Destiny*. Postcolonialism actively challenges established norms and highlights how Western interventions have aimed to reshape thought, alter moral standards, and shift global power structures (Young, 2012). Edward Said introduced the concept of 'orientalism' to illustrate how Western cultural and political dominance has been upheld through complex stereotypes that often belittle non-Western people and cultures (Fajar, 2024). Postcolonial film has been used to critically assess how non-Western subjects are framed and address long-standing stereotypes related to cultural differences and racial identities (Ponzanesi, 2018). Daniella Berghahn further explores this by using the term “exoticism” to critique Western portrayals of the non-West (Berghahn, 2021). She argues that Western cinema often domesticates non-Western cultures, creating a sense of "otherness." Moreover, many Western filmmakers prioritise aesthetics over ethics, simplifying foreign cultures to meet Western expectations and enhance accessibility for global audiences (Berghahn, 2021).

This study applied the postcolonialism theory within the film analysis framework. There are three aspects to analyse or criticise a film: content, concept, and context (Saputra, 2021). Content analysis refers to tangible elements presented in the film such as scenes, colours, camera angles, and even music (Saputra, 2021). Typically, the goals include critiquing

character portrayals or examining representations of identity. In contrast, concepts and contexts relate to hidden aspects of a film which are more abstract and not directly shown in the film (Saputra, 2021). Concept analysis covers themes, issues, impressions, and narratives within the film, helping to unpack the filmmaker's framing (Fedorov, 2023). Meanwhile, context analysis examines external factors influencing the film's production, such as the background of the film production or political circumstances (Saputra, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Synopsis and Plot of the Documentary Film *Riders of Destiny* (2019)

Riders of Destiny is a film by German director Michael Niermann, produced by Seventyone Films and released in 2019. The story follows a young horse rider on Sumbawa Island, a region in Indonesia that faces significant poverty (Niermann, 2019). In Sumbawa, limited resources and few economic opportunities make being a horse rider one of the best hopes for families to improve their livelihoods. The central character, Sila, a seven-year-old girl, shares her experiences at home, in school, and at the racetrack. The film highlights the tension between preserving tradition and addressing economic needs.

The plot is structured in three parts: the opening, the middle, and the conclusion. The first part introduces Sila and Romi Perbawa, a photographer documenting the children's horse races in Sumbawa. This section showcases the contrasting views between Sila, who enjoys her role as a horse rider, and Romi, who has a different perspective on the tradition of horse racing. As the story progresses, Sila's parents are introduced, discussing the family's economic situation, Sila's education, and her role as a horse rider. The conclusion contrasts the opinions of Sila's parents and Romi about child horse racing, illuminating the differing perspectives on tradition and Sila's future.

Postcolonial Analysis of *Riders of Destiny*

Content Analysis

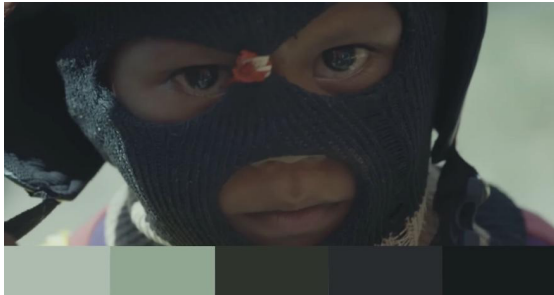
Germany's intention in Indonesia is conveyed through the filmmaker's aesthetic choices. Using designated visual choice, it frames Indonesia's traditional practice as morally flawed and in need of reform, positioning Germany as a moral authority. It advances Germany's political and moral agenda, presenting its child rights ideology as a solution to perceived societal failings and reinforcing its position as a global protector.

Since its beginning, *Riders of Destiny* has presented its stance against the tradition of child horse racing (*pacoa jara*) in Sumbawa. This message is conveyed through a visual language that draws attention to two main issues: child exploitation and poverty. The film prominently features cool colour grading, with blues and greys dominating the palette. In visual storytelling, cool colours often create a calm and inviting atmosphere, typically associated with nature. However, in this film, the colouring does more than set the mood; it carries its personality and helps shape the narrative for both the main and supporting characters (Yanaayuri & Agung, 2022). Many films and photographic works use colour to enhance character development and storytelling (Paksi, 2021). In *Riders of Destiny*, the use of dark green, brown, and grey reinforces the sombre reality faced by child horse riders, who find themselves trapped between poverty and their profession. These colours not only exist alongside one another but also blend (colour mixture) to produce darker tones (Swanakar, 2023).

In the opening scene of the film, which depicts Sila masked and preparing to ride a horse, dark green and grey emerge as the dominant colours. According to Kovsh and Dziuba (2022), green is generally used to convey a sense of harmony and calmness. However, when green is mixed with or placed alongside grey, it can acquire a negative connotation, evoking feelings of intimidation, fear, or emptiness (Kovsh & Dziuba, 2022). The use of green and grey recurs in several scenes, such as the middle part of the film where Sila is leading a horse, and in scenes showing Sila with his father as they prepare to head to the race arena. Through this recurring use of green and grey, director Niermann subtly implies an undertone of intimidation toward Sila, influencing the audience's emotions to evoke a sense of sympathy.

Besides green and grey, dark brown also appears prominently. According to Kim et al. (2014), brown conveys a rustic impression. However, if used excessively or in specific contexts, such as to depict a negative situation or portray a landscape as backward, brown can also carry a negative connotation (Kim et al., 2014). This is exemplified in *Riders of*

Destiny, where brown is used to depict the atmosphere of Bima City, suggesting it as a rural, underdeveloped, and impoverished area, particularly in scenes showing the residents using horse-drawn carriages as a mode of transportation. Brown is also used in several shots where Sila leads his horse to be bathed or riding it. Here, the filmmaker's intent appears to create an oppressive and hopeless atmosphere, thus encouraging the audience to feel an increased melancholy toward the surrounding environment.



The first scene of the film featuring Sila preparing to ride is dominated by pale grey (#aebcb0), pale olive green (#92a792), dark olive green (#2e332c), charcoal grey (#282c2f), and greenish-black (#171c1d). These hues evoke a sense of intimidation and fear.

Picture 1: Colour grading in the first scene of *Riders of Destiny*
Author [source]



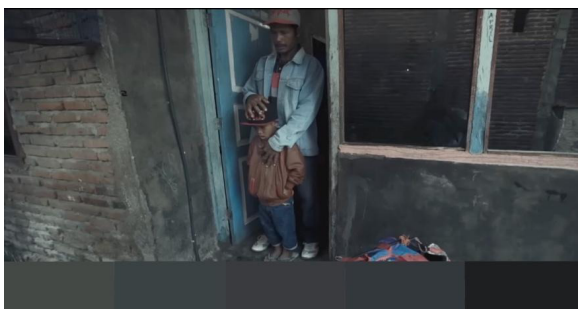
Colours used in a scene depicting the atmosphere of Bima City, Sumbawa are cream brown (#9F8260), greyish brown (#796F64), mahogany brown (#504235), dark olive brown (#4C423C), dark brownish-black (#382C26), are used to emphasise the city's "traditional" feel, subtly suggesting associations with underdevelopment and poverty.

Picture 2: Colour grading in a scene depicting Bima City
Author [source]



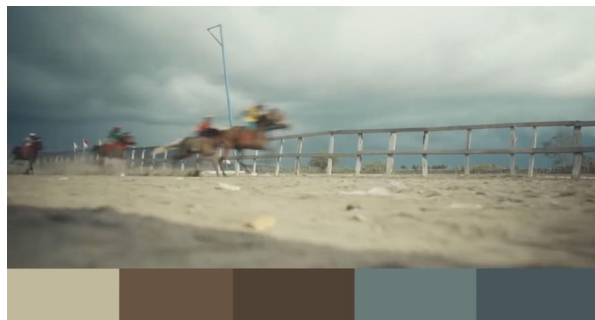
The dominant colours of a scene when Sila leads the horse are greenish grey (#6E7471), dark grey (#383636), dark brownish-black (#3C3133), brownish-black (#2D292D), and charcoal black (#19181C). These colours create a sombre, oppressive atmosphere.

Picture 3: Colour grading in a scene when Sila leading the horse
Author [source]



A scene featuring Sila with his father uses a colour palette dominated by stone green (#444946), carbon green (#3B4243), charcoal blue (#393B3F), dark greyish-black (#33383C), and charcoal black (#1D1F21). This palette imparts a dark and isolating mood, evoking sensations of solitude and emptiness.

Picture 4: Colour grading in a scene featuring Sila & his father
Author [source]



In the film's closing scene, where Sila is racing his horse, the dominant colours are khaki (#C0B99C), greyish brown (#675442), walnut brown (#504235), greenish grey (#697B79), and bluish grey (#47575C). These colours evoke an overall sense of melancholy and hopelessness.

Picture 5: Colour grading in the closing of the film
Author [source]

Beyond the nuanced application of colour grading, the filmmaker's intention to depict poverty and child exploitation is discernible through the strategic use of camera angles in portraying the film's subjects. Camera angle, defined by the height and orientation of the camera about the subject, is a potent device that allows filmmakers to subtly communicate their emotional interpretations of a scene to the audience (Savardi et al., 2023). Furthermore, this technique fosters empathetic engagement by shaping viewers' attitudes and judgments of characters, subtly guiding their responses (Hanmakyugh, 2020). Using subjective angles that present the scene from a character's viewpoint is an effective mechanism for conveying the psychological state of that character (Hanmakyugh, 2020). Through these subjective angles, the filmmaker enlists the viewer as a participatory observer, evoking emotional resonance and intensifying the audience's immersion within the scene (Hanmakyugh, 2020; Savardi et al., 2023).

The significance of camera angles lies in their ability to construct power dynamics between characters. Each angle inherently embodies its purpose and interpretive philosophy. Generally, there are six camera angle types: eye level, high angle, low angle, dutch, overhead, and aerial. *Riders of Destiny* predominantly utilises the eye-level angle, positioning the subject at the same height as the audience's gaze. This choice indicates the filmmaker's intent to adopt a seemingly neutral stance or to portray the subject as an equal to the viewer (Hanmakyugh, 2020). Eye-level angles are commonly used in interview formats, and in this film, they frame interviews with all subjects except Sila's parents, teacher, and Romi Perbawa. However, when Sila is being interviewed, the angle notably shifts to a high angle, positioning the camera above him. This approach implies a power disparity, positioning Sila as subordinate or vulnerable, often used to depict individuals in contexts of disempowerment, such as a prisoner before a judge (Hanmakyugh, 2020). In contexts lacking nuance, this angle risks casting the subject as frail, diminished, or marginalized.

In *Riders of Destiny*, the high angle appears exclusively in Sila's interview, subtly suggesting that he, as the central subject, embodies a sense of helplessness. The limited screen time allocated to Sila, as well as his single interview, reinforces the impression that his life options are constrained to his role as a jockey. This portrayal aligns with postcolonial critiques, which interrogate Western portrayals of non-Western societies as deficient, static, or powerless. Here, the filmmaker presents the people of Bima and the traditional horse-racing event, *pacoa jara*, featuring child jockeys, as an exotic or culturally 'primitive' phenomenon. This perspective reflects the postcolonial critique of artistic representation, a concept Berghahn (2021) describes as "exoticism"—the tendency to frame non-Western subjects as innately "authentic" and "simple," privileging aesthetic fascination over ethical depth, thereby reducing complex traditions to simplistic visual spectacles.



Picture 6: Camera angle in a scene featuring Sila
Author [source]

In the opening scene of the film featuring Sila's interview, the camera angle used is a high angle, where the camera is positioned above the subject, diverging from eye level with the audience's gaze. This angle is used exclusively in Sila's interview, subtly suggesting his perceived lack of agency or confinement within his circumstances.



Picture 7: Camera angle in a scene featuring Romi
Author [source]

In scenes depicting Romi, the camera angle used is a level. This places the subject on an equal visual plane with the audience, implying that Romi is viewed as more empowered or authoritative. Furthermore, the choice to depict Romi with an eye-level angle elevates his alignment with the filmmakers' critique of the practice of child jockeying.

Concept Analysis

Generally, there are six approaches in documentary film: observational, expository, poetic, participatory, performative, and reflective (Yu & Yan, 2024). Each of these approaches highlights a specific style of delivery, which forms the foundation of a documentary. *Riders of Destiny* is a documentary that adopts the expository approach, which aims to explore the filmmaker's perspective on an issue and persuade the audience to agree with that viewpoint. This approach initially emerged to emphasise objectivity and logical argumentation. However, it is also prone to misuse, potentially exaggerating simple issues or oversimplifying complex ones (Yu & Yan, 2024). In *Riders of Destiny*, the filmmaker tends to simplify the tradition of horse racing, or *pacoa jara*, as a violation of children's rights or child exploitation. This is also a characteristic of the postcolonial perspective. The film does not address the roots of this tradition or link it to the current context of Bima society in Sumbawa. This is evident from the interview method used. While interviews are commonly used to reinforce arguments in the expository documentary approach, these interviews should be assessed from two aspects: the selection of the interview subjects and the substance of the interviews themselves.

One of the dominant subjects in the film, alongside Sila, is Romi Perbawa, a photographer who has long been documenting child jockeys for his project. The choice of Romi as an interview subject is problematic due to his background, as he is not from Sumbawa Island or the West Nusa Tenggara Province, meaning he does not fully comprehend the actual conditions of the local community. As an outsider, Romi argues that the *pacoa jara* tradition also violates children's rights, without considering the tradition's historical context or its connection to the community's current state. Romi's presence in the film is irrelevant if the documentary aims to address children's rights issues. A discussion of the history and cultural aspects of the *pacoa jara* tradition should also be included. Unfortunately, the film does not feature local community leaders or cultural experts who would be more relevant for such a discussion. Consequently, the film can be said to oversimplify the complex issue of the *pacoa jara* tradition. Instead, the film features interviews with Sila's parents, who mostly discuss their financial situation. In the film, Sila's parents only mention that Sila has helped the family's economy. There is no mention of their family's economic shortcomings. However, the filmmaker captures this in a way that associates it with poverty and underdevelopment.

The interview method in documentary filmmaking is intrinsically linked to the extent of a filmmaker's engagement in steering the interview process. Although documentaries are typically unscripted, directors retain a subtle yet influential capacity to shape the film's direction indirectly (Rosental & Eckhardt, 2016). Documentary filmmakers must navigate interview ethics, carefully balancing the pursuit of truth with the need to grant interviewees freedom to speak openly, unencumbered by undue pressure or manipulation. Furthermore, filmmakers hold a responsibility to present interviewees' responses faithfully, ensuring that context and nuance are preserved, even when editing may necessitate some simplification. For instance, a director might prepare key questions or guiding points to facilitate an interview, yet they must refrain from imposing influence on the subject's responses (Rosental & Eckhardt, 2016).

Directorial intervention often manifests in the nuanced responses of interviewees, as seen in *Riders of Destiny*, where the director's influence subtly frames the *pacoa jara* tradition as exploitative towards children. As a result, Romi's interview in the film discusses how children lose educational rights, endure injuries as jockeys, and have little choice but to participate in horse racing to support their families financially. Sila's parents, likewise, discuss how Sila's involvement in jockeying has positively impacted the family's financial stability. In essence, it seems unlikely that Romi and Sila's parents would discuss socioeconomic disadvantages, underdevelopment, or exploitation without the filmmaker's guiding questions steering the conversation in these directions.

Context Analysis

Riders of Destiny is a documentary film directed by a German director, Michael Niermann and produced by a German production house, Seventyone Films. The film aims to shape global public opinion by highlighting *pacoa jara*'s more controversial aspects, thereby generating international sympathy. However, the film was not distributed publicly in Indonesia. It was primarily showcased only at festivals in Europe and the United States, including the German TV Award (2019), Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (2019), Peloponnisos International Documentary Film Festival (2019), and EQUUS International Film Festival (2021), without any screenings in Indonesia (Seventyone Films, n.d). This film reinforces an image of Indonesia as underdeveloped and as violating human rights. Indonesia was presented as a society burdened by traditions that violate children's rights. Therefore, the film oversimplifies the historical and cultural context.

Given *Riders of Destiny*'s thematic focus on tradition and culture, the filmmakers are expected to have an informed understanding of the *pacoa jara* tradition's local context before offering critique. The film's portrayal of *pacoa jara* as a practice rooted in Sumbawa's poverty and exploitation of children risks oversimplification. Historically, *pacoa jara* emerged during the Kingdom of Bima era (Isnaini & Hasbi, 2020), initially serving as an elite amusement and royal self-defence activity that gradually extended to wider public participation. Today, it has evolved into a cultural symbol that solidifies social, economic, and political bonds within the community (Wahyuni, Irruba'i, & Maulany, 2023). The races coincide with the rice planting season and hold high social value in Sumbawa. The event further allows local villages to showcase their best jockeys and horses, enhancing collective identity and cultural continuity (Wahyuni, Irruba'i, & Maulany, 2023).

Children aged six to twelve play pivotal roles in *pacoa jara*. Their skill in handling and racing horses at high speeds is essential for the event's success, and their involvement transcends mere participation, as it requires the mastery of horsemanship, balance, and control—skills often acquired informally through training by family members. These young jockeys exhibit remarkable physical and mental agility, underscoring the importance of early skill development (Coleman, 2023). Winning a horse race in Sumbawa carries profound social significance, elevating the status of the jockey and their family, thus linking success in *pacoa jara* with communal pride and honour. This achievement is a source of shared pride, reaffirming the family's social standing (Elvira & Rizka, 2020). The cultural importance of *pacoa jara* is further complemented by its economic dimension; a successful racing horse increases in value, benefiting the families involved.

The inherent risks to child participants in *pacoa jara* raise critical concerns about their welfare and safety. Physical dangers, such as falls, severe injuries, and even fatalities, are significant, and these child jockeys often lack adequate protective gear (Maulana, Sugiyanto, & Riyadi, 2021). However, increasing awareness of these issues has spurred calls for improved safety measures, including better protective equipment and comprehensive training, reflecting a growing

understanding of the need to protect children within this cultural tradition (Maulana, Sugiyanto, & Riyadi, 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the positive impacts of this tradition on the community and the young participants. Engaging in *pacoa jara* enables child jockeys to develop life skills, such as coordination, balance, and resilience, which contribute to their physical and personal growth. Furthermore, success in the races can provide financial rewards for the jockey's family, while the rigours of training instil discipline and responsibility (Isnaini & Hasbi, 2020).

***Riders of Destiny* and Germany's Interests in Indonesia**

At first glance, *Riders of Destiny* may seem like a typical documentary film, focusing on an unseen issue to draw greater public attention. In the case of *Riders of Destiny*, the issue highlighted by the filmmaker, who is from Germany, is exposing child exploitation practices in Sumbawa, Indonesia, through the tradition of *pacoa jara*. Germany's significant attention to children's rights and its mission to advocate for child protection appears positive. However, in reality, this mission contradicts local cultural practices. As such, Germany's argument regarding child exploitation and its intention in creating *Riders of Destiny* becomes questionable.

Through the analysis of content, concept, and context in the previous section, it becomes clear that Germany's intent in Indonesia is to preserve human rights based on Western liberal values (liberal human rights). By depicting the *pacoa jara* tradition in Sumbawa, which shows exploitative practices towards children, the film positions local culture as something "wrong" according to international child rights standards. This illustrates how Western media, in this case film, can become a tool to intervene in non-Western cultures by imposing a moral framework based on Western perspectives on other societies. Although Germany does not directly rule Indonesia, this film serves as a means to introduce and spread a universal human rights ideology, thus changing the global perception of what is considered "right" or "wrong" in the context of local culture. By leveraging global media and international distribution through film festivals, *Riders of Destiny* reinforces the cultural and ideological hegemony that still influences global perceptions of non-Western societies, even without direct political control. Global media also helps spread Western values about human rights, which are seen as universal and absolute. Therefore, *Riders of Destiny* is not just a documentary, but also an ideological instrument to maintain the dominance of Western values in the global order.

CONCLUSION

Riders of Destiny reveals a clear Western bias, intentionally constructed to serve a specific ideological purpose. Through its content, concept, and context, the film highlights the *pacoa jara* practice in Sumbawa, framing it as a symbol of poverty and backwardness. The director employs visual techniques, such as gloomy colouring and angles that evoke helplessness, alongside selective interviews from external critics, which contribute to the narrative that the tradition is morally wrong and needs reform. This framing not only simplifies the social conditions in Indonesia but also forces a Western human rights perspective onto a practice that is deeply rooted in local cultural and historical contexts.

In this light, *Riders of Destiny* functions as a tool of German soft power, reinforcing the dominance of Western values on the global stage. By presenting Western liberal ideals as the universal moral standard, the film marginalises non-Western perspectives, thus perpetuating an "othering" of local traditions. As such, *Riders of Destiny* transcends cultural documentation, operating as a vehicle for modern ideological postcolonialism. It seeks to shape global perceptions of non-Western societies, maintaining Western hegemony in discussions surrounding human rights, modernity, and civilization.

By critically analysing such films, scholars can uncover the subtle yet powerful ways in which media shapes global attitudes and reinforces political influence. This research contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural narratives are used to uphold hegemonic global power structures, demonstrating the importance of examining media representations through a postcolonial lens.

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