



Pesugihan as a Cultural Belief System in Contemporary Indonesian Drama

Putry Afrianti¹, Beth N Mutugu², Ali Daneshvar Kiyani³, Toreba Firuza⁴, Abdurahman Ahmed Ali Milad⁵

¹Department of language and Literature Education, Social Education, Muhammadiyah University of North Sumatra, Medan, Indonesia

²Dapartement of Linguistik and Literature, Social Sciences, Kenyatta University, Kenya

³Dapartement Persian Language and Literature, Public Linguistics, University of Tehran, Iran

⁴Foreign Language Education, Foreign Languages, Karakalpak State University, Uzbekistan

⁵Dapartement Foreign Language Education, Applied Linguistics, Alasmarya Islamic Univeristy, Libya

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to examine the cultural representation of *pesugihan* in the drama script *Pesugihan Nayan Tula* by Afrion using a literary anthropology approach to reveal embedded cultural values, belief systems, and socio-cultural structures reflected in the narrative

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative descriptive method using a literary anthropology approach. The primary data source was the 2016 published drama script by Laboratorium Sastra Medan. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using cultural category frameworks based on Koentjaraningrat's anthropological theory and Ratna's literary anthropology perspective.

Main Findings: The findings reveal that *pesugihan* is represented as a cultural belief system rooted in animism, ritual practices, myth, and social structure. The script portrays traditional systems including religious beliefs, ritual offerings, supernatural agreements, and socio-cultural conflicts reflecting moral deviation and community value transformation.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study offers a focused literary anthropology analysis on *pesugihan* within modern Indonesian drama, integrating classical anthropological theory with contemporary literary text analysis. It advances cultural-literary studies by contextualizing mystical economic practices as structured cultural phenomena within dramatic narrative discourse.

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Corresponding Author:

Putry Afrianti,

Department of Language and Literature Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,

Muhammadiyah University of North Sumatra,

Kapten Muchtar Basari Road, North Sumatra, Medan, 20238, Indonesia

Email: putryarianti@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural belief systems related to wealth acquisition through supernatural mediation are not limited to one geographical region but appear across various societies worldwide. In many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, ritual practices involving spirits, sacred intermediaries, or mystical contracts are embedded within traditional cosmologies and social structures [1]-[3]. Anthropological scholarship has long examined how such practices function as symbolic negotiations between economic anxiety and metaphysical assurance, particularly in communities facing structural inequality and limited access to formal economic mobility [4]-[6]. These phenomena reveal that economic aspiration is frequently intertwined with spiritual narratives, producing hybrid systems of belief that operate simultaneously within material and metaphysical dimensions.

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In contemporary global discourse, the persistence of mystical-economic practices challenges the binary opposition between modernity and tradition. Despite technological advancement and rational bureaucratic governance, supernatural-based wealth rituals continue to adapt and survive within modern societies [7], [8]. Rather than disappearing, these practices transform into cultural symbols reflecting moral tension, political distrust, and socio-economic instability. Scholars of cultural studies and anthropology argue that such rituals must be interpreted not merely as superstition, but as narrative systems encoding collective memory, historical trauma, and communal identity [9]-[11].

Literary texts play a crucial role in documenting and reconstructing these cultural realities. Through narrative structures, dialogue, and symbolism, literature becomes a cultural archive that preserves belief systems, ritual practices, and social conflicts within aesthetic forms [12]-[14]. The intersection between anthropology and literature has thus produced an interdisciplinary field known as literary anthropology, which positions literary works as sites of cultural representation and ideological negotiation [15], [16]. This approach enables scholars to interpret fictional narratives as cultural documents that reflect systems of knowledge, belief, and power embedded within society.

Within the Indonesian socio-cultural context, the concept of *pesugihan* a ritual practice seeking wealth or protection through supernatural agreements remains a controversial yet culturally persistent phenomenon. Rooted in pre Islamic animistic and dynamistic traditions and later interacting with religious transformations, *pesugihan* represents a layered belief system involving myth, ritual offerings, spiritual intermediaries, and sacrificial consequences [17], [18]. Although widely discussed in folklore and popular discourse, systematic literary-anthropological studies examining *pesugihan* within modern dramatic texts remain limited. Most existing studies focus either on sociological perspectives of belief systems or structural literary analysis without integrating anthropological cultural frameworks.

The drama script *Pesugihan Nayan Tula* by Afrion presents a compelling narrative that situates *pesugihan* within a modern political context involving corruption, power, and moral conflict. The text not only portrays ritual practices but also exposes tensions between religious values, political authority, and community survival. However, scholarly examination of this drama has not yet explored how *pesugihan* operates as a structured cultural system encompassing religious belief, myth, social hierarchy, and moral negotiation [19]. This gap indicates the need for a literary anthropology approach capable of decoding the cultural architecture embedded within the dramatic narrative.

Based on previous research that has been done, there is a gap that can be filled by this research, such as the first article [20] discusses the representation of masculine culture in a popular drama using a narrative structuralism approach and representation analysis, which emphasizes how male characters are constructed through roles, dialogues, and power relations in the storyline; the focus of this study is on aspects of self-image, domination, patriarchy, and the actual structure of characters as a form of meaning production in popular culture, so that culture is understood as the result of symbolic construction in media texts. The second article [21] examines cultural phenomena in literary/dramatic works by placing the text as a reflection of certain social realities, especially in seeing the relationship between cultural values, social systems, and representational practices that appear in the narrative, but the approach is still oriented towards thematic and representational reading, not yet to the exploration of belief systems as epistemological structures that live in society. Meanwhile, the third article [22] highlights the dynamics of culture and social practices in a broader context by emphasizing the socio-cultural aspects and their relationship with the construction of meaning in the public sphere, but has not specifically described how a traditional belief works as a value system that has legitimacy, rites, myths, and symbolic inheritance mechanisms in contemporary drama texts. Based on these three articles, there is a research gap, namely the absence of studies that explicitly position *pesugihan* as a cultural belief system that is analyzed anthropologically and ideologically in contemporary Indonesian drama; previous studies have mostly stopped at the level of cultural representation and construction of meaning, rather than on dismantling the structure of belief, cosmology, human relations with supernatural powers, and negotiations between tradition and modernity that shape the practice of *pesugihan* in dramatic texts, so my research attempts to fill this gap by presenting a more systematic, contextual, and in-depth reading of *pesugihan* as a cultural belief system that is reproduced and negotiated in contemporary Indonesian drama works.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to position *pesugihan* not merely as a narrative motif, a symbol of conflict, or a dramatic element in a story, but as a cultural belief system that has a structure of values, cosmology, social legitimacy, and a mechanism of cultural reproduction in contemporary Indonesian drama [23]-[25]. While previous studies have mostly stopped at analyzing cultural representations or the construction of social meaning in texts, this research goes further by unraveling how *pesugihan* works as an organized belief system encompassing human relations with supernatural entities, the concept of sacrifice, material rewards, and the negotiation of morality in modern society [26], [27]. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in its literary anthropological approach that positions drama texts as a space for the articulation of collective beliefs, not only as social reflections, but as an arena for the production and transformation of the meaning of traditional beliefs amidst the currents of modernity.

Theoretically, this research has implications for strengthening literary and cultural studies by broadening the analytical perspective from mere representation to a systemic reading of local beliefs in dramatic texts [28], [29], [30]. This research can enrich the treasury of literary anthropology, cultural studies, and Indonesian drama studies by offering an analytical framework that views the practice of *pesugihan* as part of the ideological and cosmological structure of society [31], [32]. Practically, the results of this study can serve as a reference for academics, researchers, and educators in understanding how literary texts play a role in reproducing, critiquing, or even transforming traditional belief systems. Furthermore, this research also opens up space for critical reflection for the public regarding how belief in *pesugihan* is reconstructed in the contemporary social context, including in relation to issues of morality, economics, and the crisis of values [33]-[35].

This research is urgent because the phenomenon of *pesugihan* (sacred ritual offerings) remains alive in the collective imagination of Indonesian society and continues to be represented in various forms of modern literature and performances, including contemporary drama [36]-[38]. Amidst the accelerating modernization and rationalization of social life, the presence of *pesugihan* narratives demonstrates that traditional belief systems are not simply disappearing, but rather transforming and negotiating with the realities of the times. Without in-depth study, *pesugihan* risks being understood simplistically as merely mystical or superstitious practices, even though it contains complex social, economic, symbolic, and ideological dimensions [39], [40]. Therefore, this research is crucial for bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, while also providing an academic contribution to understanding the dynamics of Indonesian cultural beliefs through the lens of drama as a medium of social representation and reflection.

Therefore, this study is entitled “*Pesugihan As A Cultural Belief System In Contemporary Indonesian Drama.*” This research aims to examine how *pesugihan* is constructed as a cultural belief system within the drama, to identify its anthropological elements, and to contribute to interdisciplinary discourse connecting literary studies and cultural anthropology in contemporary Indonesian scholarship.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design within the framework of literary anthropology. Qualitative research is appropriate for interpreting symbolic structures, belief systems, and cultural representations embedded in textual narratives [41]. The approach integrates anthropological cultural system theory and literary textual analysis to identify and classify cultural elements represented in the drama script.

The object of analysis was the drama script *Pesugihan Nayan Tula* by Afrion, published by Laboratorium Sastra Medan (2016 edition). The unit of analysis consisted of dialogues, narrative descriptions, character actions, ritual depictions, and symbolic expressions related to *pesugihan* practices.

2.2. Data Collection Technique

Data were collected using documentation techniques and close reading strategies. The drama script served as the primary data source, while anthropological and literary theory references functioned as secondary data sources. Data were recorded in a coding sheet to ensure systematic categorization.

2.3. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis combined with cultural category classification based on Koentjaraningrat’s cultural system components and literary anthropology perspective [42]. The analysis focused on identifying structural patterns of belief, ritual mechanisms, supernatural agreements, and socio-cultural conflicts embedded in the text. The analytical stages include, first data reduction, second, cultural categorization, third, thematic interpretation, and the last, cultural system mapping.

2.4. Cultural Element Classification

Before interpretation, all identified data were grouped into anthropological cultural categories. The classification framework is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Cultural Classification Framework

Variable	Category	Description
Religious Belief	Animism and supernatural entities	Spirit invocation, sacred contracts
Ritual Practice	Offering and ceremonial acts	Ritual objects, mantra recitation
Mythical Structure	Myth and symbolic narrative	Sacrifice, mystical agreement
Social Structure	Power and hierarchy	Political authority, community role
Moral System	Ethical deviation	Greed, corruption, social conflict

Table 1 shows that cultural elements were systematically categorized to ensure analytical consistency and theoretical alignment.

2.5. Research Procedure

The research was conducted chronologically through systematic stages to ensure analytical rigor and replicability. The procedure follows the qualitative content analysis model adapted from cultural category frameworks [43]. Research Procedure Algorithm.



Figure 1. Research Procedure

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Pesugihan as a Structured Religious Belief System

The analysis reveals that pesugihan in Pesugihan Nayan Tula is constructed not merely as mystical superstition but as an organized belief system embedded within cultural cosmology. The text portrays supernatural entities as active agents capable of granting material wealth in exchange for ritual compliance and moral sacrifice. Dialogues between characters and ritual mediators demonstrate structured invocation processes, indicating that pesugihan operates within a recognized spiritual hierarchy.

This finding aligns with anthropological interpretations of animistic systems in which invisible entities function as transactional actors within a cosmological order [44], [45]. The drama illustrates how characters internalize this belief as rational within their socio-cultural environment. Thus, *pesugihan* is represented as a normalized cultural mechanism rather than an irrational anomaly.

3.2. Ritual Mechanism and Symbolic Objects

The study identifies ritual elements systematically embedded in the narrative structure. Ritual practices include preparation of offerings, invocation recitations (mantra), sacred objects, and specific ceremonial spaces. These ritual actions are portrayed as procedural and regulated, reinforcing the idea that pesugihan is governed by symbolic codes and cultural norms. Table 2 presents the dominant ritual components identified in the script.

Table 2. Ritual Components Represented in the Drama

Ritual Element	Representation in Text	Cultural Function
Offerings	Food, incense, symbolic items	Medium of spiritual negotiation
Mantra	Recited invocation phrases	Activation of supernatural contract
Sacred Space	Isolated ritual location	Boundary between profane and sacred
Mediator Figure	Ritual guide/shaman	Authority in spiritual transaction

The presence of ritual mediators reflects hierarchical spiritual authority structures. This corresponds to cultural anthropological theory that ritual specialists function as intermediaries between human and metaphysical domains [46]. The drama carefully constructs these ritual procedures to emphasize cultural legitimacy within the fictional society.

3.3. Mythical Contract and Supernatural Exchange

A central finding is the depiction of *pesugihan* as a contractual exchange system. The narrative consistently emphasizes reciprocity: material gain must be balanced with sacrifice, loyalty, or moral compromise. This supernatural contract structure resembles myth-based exchange systems documented in traditional societies [47]. The drama intensifies this contract through symbolic consequences misfortune, spiritual disturbance, or social collapse when agreements are violated. Such narrative patterns reinforce myth as regulatory cultural discourse. Rather than random supernatural intervention, the exchange operates within predictable moral causality. Figure 2 illustrates the supernatural exchange structure identified in the narrative.



Figure 2. Structure of Supernatural Contract in the Drama

This structured causality demonstrates that *pesugihan* is framed as an ethical-economic system rather than chaotic mysticism.

3.4. Social Structure and Political Dimension

The findings further indicate that *pesugihan* is embedded within political and social hierarchy. The drama situates ritual practice within contexts of power, corruption, and authority struggles. Wealth acquisition through supernatural mediation becomes intertwined with political ambition and social domination [48]. Characters in positions of authority are portrayed as more likely to engage in ritual agreements, reflecting socioeconomic inequality. This narrative construction suggests that mystical economic practices function symbolically to critique systemic corruption and moral decay within institutional structures. Thus, the drama extends *pesugihan* beyond personal belief into socio-political commentary. It becomes a metaphorical critique of power accumulation and ethical compromise [49].

3.5. Moral Deviation and Cultural Value Transformation

Another significant finding is the transformation of communal values. Initially framed as a means of survival or prosperity, *pesugihan* gradually reveals destructive implications: family breakdown, social distrust, and spiritual alienation. The narrative demonstrates how economic obsession erodes collective ethics. This reflects a cultural shift from communal solidarity toward individualistic ambition. The anthropological lens reveals how the drama encodes moral anxiety within mystical narrative structures. The supernatural element thus functions as symbolic amplification of ethical crisis. Table 3 summarizes the main cultural findings.

Table 3. Summary of Cultural Construction of Pesugihan

Cultural Dimension	Representation	Social Implication
Belief System	Animistic contract with spirits	Spiritual dependency
Ritual Practice	Structured ceremonial acts	Cultural legitimacy
Mythical Structure	Exchange and sacrifice	Moral regulation
Social Hierarchy	Political involvement	Power imbalance
Ethical Values	Moral compromise	Social fragmentation

The table shows the relationship between cultural dimensions, their forms of representation, and the resulting social implications. Belief systems based on animistic contracts with spirits illustrate a society's spiritual dependence on supernatural powers. Structured ritual practices serve as cultural legitimacy, strengthening the continuity of traditions. Mythical structures emphasizing exchange and sacrifice play a role in regulating collective morality. Political involvement in social hierarchies creates power imbalances, while compromises on ethical values have the potential to lead to social fragmentation within a society.

3.6. Integrative Cultural Interpretation

Integrating these findings, *Pesugihan Nayan Tula* constructs *pesugihan* as a multidimensional cultural system composed of belief, ritual, myth, power, and morality. The drama does not merely depict mystical practice but reconstructs a cultural architecture where economic aspiration intersects with spiritual cosmology and socio-political instability [50].

From a literary anthropology perspective, the text functions as a cultural document encoding collective anxieties about wealth, authority, and moral integrity in contemporary Indonesian society [51]. The structured ritual depiction, supernatural contractual logic, and political embedding demonstrate that *pesugihan* operates symbolically as both cultural preservation and cultural critique [52].

The findings demonstrate that *pesugihan* in *Pesugihan Nayan Tula* is constructed as a coherent cultural system rather than an isolated mystical act. From a literary anthropology perspective, the ritual process, supernatural contract, and symbolic exchange mechanisms reflect what anthropologists identify as a cosmological economy an interpretive framework in which material aspirations are negotiated through metaphysical structures. The drama illustrates that belief in supernatural mediation emerges not from irrationality but from socio-economic insecurity and moral uncertainty [53]. This aligns with anthropological arguments that ritualized wealth acquisition

practices often function as adaptive responses to structural inequality and limited institutional trust. By embedding ritual logic within a dramatic narrative, the text transforms mystical belief into a symbolic language that articulates collective anxiety over economic survival and power accumulation [54].

Furthermore, the structured ritual components identified in the study offerings, mediators, sacred spaces, and invocation formulas indicate that *pesugihan* operates within a codified system governed by cultural norms and hierarchical authority [55], [56]. The presence of ritual specialists reinforces the idea that spiritual transactions are institutionalized within the fictional society. This institutionalization reflects broader anthropological theories suggesting that ritual authority legitimizes otherwise transgressive acts by situating them within recognized symbolic systems. In the drama, moral compromise becomes culturally negotiable when mediated through ritual structure. Thus, the narrative does not merely portray deviance; it demonstrates how cultural frameworks can normalize ethically problematic behavior under the guise of tradition and spiritual necessity [57].

More critically, the integration of *pesugihan* within political and social hierarchies transforms the mystical practice into a metaphor for systemic corruption and moral erosion. The drama situates supernatural wealth acquisition alongside political ambition, implying that both operate through transactional logic exchange, sacrifice, and consequence [58], [59]. This parallel suggests that the mystical contract mirrors real-world structures of power accumulation, where ethical costs are often concealed beneath formal legitimacy. Consequently, the literary text functions simultaneously as cultural preservation and social critique. Through symbolic amplification, the supernatural dimension exposes tensions between communal values and individual ambition in contemporary society. The study therefore contributes to broader interdisciplinary discourse by demonstrating that mystical economic narratives in literature serve as interpretive sites for examining moral transformation, political power, and cultural continuity within modern contexts [60].

Based on the findings of the three previous articles, in general, these studies tend to position *pesugihan* as a phenomenon of mystical belief understood within the framework of folklore, occult practices, or as a symbol of individual moral deviation without systematically describing the cosmological structure, ritual mechanisms, and power relations that surround it. The first article [61] for example, emphasizes the aspect of myth representation as a form of oral tradition and cultural heritage, but has not elaborated how the supernatural contractual system works as a structured economic-cosmological logic. The second article [62] examines the dimensions of ritual and symbol, but still sees it as a partial spiritual practice, not as a hierarchical system with mediators, sacred spaces, and regulative negotiation procedures. Meanwhile, the third article [63] highlights aspects of social criticism in literary texts, but has not integrated the dimensions of belief, ritual, myth, and politics as a coherent cultural architecture. Different from the three studies, this study through the drama script *Pesugihan Nayan Tula* by Afrion confirms that *pesugihan* is represented as a structured religious belief system, complete with formal ritual mechanisms, supernatural contracts based on ethical-economic exchange, and its relationship to social hierarchy and power practices. This study does not only interpret *pesugihan* as superstition or a symbol of morality, but as a "cosmological economy" that reflects collective anxiety about economic inequality, institutional crises, and the transformation of cultural values. Thus, the research gap lies in the absence of studies that comprehensively integrate the dimensions of literary anthropology to dismantle the construction of *pesugihan* as a multidimensional cultural system in contemporary drama texts.

The novelty of this research lies in the analytical construction that positions *pesugihan* not merely as a mystical practice or individual moral symbol, but as a structured religious belief system that operates within a "cosmological economy" framework that unites the dimensions of ritual, myth, spiritual hierarchy, supernatural contract, and socio-political power relations in an integrated manner within the text of Afrion's drama *Pesugihan Nayan Tula*. While previous research tends to examine aspects of folklore, magical symbolism, or social criticism separately, this research presents a multidimensional synthesis based on a literary anthropology approach that interprets *pesugihan* as a cultural mechanism that has formal ritual procedures, a spiritual authority structure (mediator/shaman), a logic of reciprocal exchange (sacrifice-reward), and systemic ethical consequences [64], [65]. Thus, the novelty of this research lies not only in the object of study, but in the conceptual framework that reconstructs mystical practices as a coherent cultural architecture and functions as a representation of the collective anxiety of contemporary society towards the economic crisis, social inequality, and the delegitimization of moral institutions [66].

Theoretically, this research expands the development of literary anthropology studies by demonstrating that contemporary drama texts can be read as cultural documents that structurally map belief systems, not merely symbolic narratives [67]-[69]. This finding opens up space for an interdisciplinary approach that connects literary studies, religious anthropology, and cultural politics studies in reading local belief practices as adaptive responses to socio-economic pressures. Practically and pedagogically, the results of this research can be utilized in literature and culture learning to deepen students' understanding of the relationship between myth, ritual, and power structures in modern Indonesian society [70]. Furthermore, its social implications show that the practice of *pesugihan* in the text is not only a reflection of traditional beliefs, but a critical metaphor for exploitative economic systems and the accumulation of power that ignores moral integrity, so that drama functions as a medium for collective ethical reflection.

Although this study offers a comprehensive reading of the construction of pesugihan as a multidimensional cultural system, several limitations are worth noting [71]. First, this study focuses on a single drama text, thus generalizing to representations of pesugihan in other Indonesian literary works is still limited. Second, the analysis was conducted through a textual and interpretive approach without involving field studies or ethnographic interviews that could have enriched the validation of actual belief practices in society. Third, this study focuses more on the structural and symbolic dimensions, thus not exploring in depth the aspects of readers' or audiences' reception of the representation of pesugihan [72]. Therefore, further research could broaden the scope of the object, integrate cultural ethnographic approaches, and examine the reception dimension to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of pesugihan beliefs in the contemporary social context.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *pesugihan* in *Pesugihan Nayan Tula* is constructed as an integrated cultural system encompassing structured belief, ritual mechanisms, mythical contracts, social hierarchy, and moral negotiation rather than as a fragmented mystical practice. The drama systematically represents offerings, mediators, sacred spaces, and supernatural agreements as components of a legitimized symbolic order, reflecting broader anthropological patterns of spiritual-economic exchange. Furthermore, by embedding ritualized wealth acquisition within political ambition and social power relations, the narrative transforms *pesugihan* into a metaphorical critique of corruption, inequality, and ethical erosion in contemporary society. Through a literary anthropology perspective, the study demonstrates that modern Indonesian drama functions as a cultural document that reconstructs traditional cosmologies within present socio-political realities, thereby contributing to interdisciplinary discourse by framing mystical-economic narratives as structured cultural phenomena with enduring symbolic and social relevance.

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USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technologies were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All stages of the research process, including data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation, were conducted entirely by the authors without the assistance of any AI-based tools.

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