

EMBODIED INTIMACY AND SOFT POWER IN INDONESIAN CINEMA: A CULTURAL AND POSTCOLONIAL READING OF *PANGKU*

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ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengeksplorasi gestur pangku—memeluk atau menidurkan seseorang di pangkuan—sebagai lokasi keintiman yang terejawantah dalam sinema kontemporer Indonesia, sambil menelaah perannya dalam memproyeksikan kekuatan lunak Indonesia. Pangku umumnya digambarkan sebagai gestur kasih sayang keluarga, tetapi representasi sinematik mengungkap makna budaya, sosial, dan politik yang lebih dalam. Studi ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana pangku berfungsi secara naratif dan semiotik, serta bagaimana hal itu berkontribusi pada diplomasi budaya Indonesia dengan mempromosikan identitas dan nilai-nilai nasional secara global. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan, dengan menganalisis empat film Indonesia kontemporer tahun 2024 dan melakukan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan lima ahli film. Analisis naratif tematik, dikombinasikan dengan lensa postkolonial, digunakan untuk mengungkap lapisan simbolik dan ideologis pangku. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pangku tidak hanya menyampaikan keintiman dan perhatian, tetapi juga mengkomunikasikan nilai-nilai budaya yang dapat meningkatkan kekuatan lunak Indonesia. Gestur tersebut secara bersamaan mencerminkan hierarki sosial dan pengaruh pascakolonial, sekaligus menyediakan media untuk ekspresi budaya dan pembangunan citra global. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi secara teoretis pada kajian film dan pascakolonial, serta secara praktis pada diplomasi budaya dan hubungan internasional.

Kata kunci: Keintiman Terejawantah, Soft Power, Perfilman Indonesia, Bacaan Pascakolonial, Diplomasi Budaya

ABSTRACT

This study explores the gesture of pangku—holding or seating someone on one’s lap—as a site of embodied intimacy in contemporary Indonesian cinema, while examining its role in projecting Indonesia’s soft power. Pangku is commonly portrayed as an affectionate familial gesture, but cinematic representations reveal deeper cultural, social, and political meanings. The study aims to analyze how pangku functions narratively and semiotically, and how it contributes to Indonesia’s cultural diplomacy by promoting national identity and values globally. A qualitative approach was employed, analyzing four contemporary Indonesian films 2024 and conducting semi-structured interviews with five film scholars. Thematic narrative analysis, combined with a postcolonial lens, was used to uncover the symbolic and ideological layers of pangku. Findings suggest that pangku not only conveys intimacy and care but also communicates cultural values that can enhance Indonesia’s soft power. The gesture simultaneously reflects societal hierarchies and postcolonial influences, providing a medium for cultural expression and global image-building. This study contributes theoretically to film and postcolonial studies and practically to cultural diplomacy and international relations.

Keywords: Embodied Intimacy, Soft Power, Indonesian Cinema, Postcolonial Reading, Cultural Diplomacy

I. INTRODUCTION

The gesture of *pangku*—seating or holding someone on one’s lap—is widely recognized in Indonesian culture as a symbol of care, protection, and affection (Badad Alauddin et al., 2025). Beyond its literal physicality, *pangku* embodies relational intimacy, signifying trust, familial closeness, and emotional bonding between individuals. In

contemporary Indonesian cinema, the representation of *pangku* extends beyond personal or domestic spheres (Afifulloh & Wijayanti, 2023); it functions as a narrative device that communicates subtle relational dynamics, such as hierarchies, gender roles, and emotional dependencies. Through careful framing, camera positioning, and narrative emphasis, filmmakers depict how physical

proximity mediates social relations and conveys emotional nuance (Schilke et al., n.d.). Moreover, cinematic depictions of *pangku* carry broader that resonate on both national and global levels, positioning Indonesian culture within the framework of soft power (Nye, 1990). By highlighting gestures of intimacy and culturally specific values, films featuring *pangku* contribute to shaping perceptions of Indonesia abroad, demonstrating how media and arts can operate as instruments of cultural diplomacy (Zanella et al., 2024).

Although prior studies have examined themes such as intimacy, family relationships, and embodied gestures in Indonesian cinema, research specifically focusing on gestures like *pangku* remains scarce (Afifulloh & Wijayanti, 2023). Existing scholarship largely addresses general representations of emotion or family dynamics, often neglecting the intersection of bodily expression, cultural symbolism, and global influence. This leaves a gap in understanding how intimate gestures simultaneously function as narrative devices and as vehicles for cultural projection. To address this gap, the current study adopts a multidisciplinary approach that integrates literary analysis, cinematic theory, and postcolonial perspectives. This framework allows for a comprehensive investigation of how *pangku* operates both as a site of personal intimacy and as a cultural symbol communicating Indonesia's identity, values, and historical memory to diverse audiences (Liu & Hongxia, 2024).

The primary objectives of this study are threefold. First, it aims to examine how *pangku* is represented as embodied intimacy in contemporary Indonesian cinema, emphasizing the ways in which physical gestures convey emotional and relational nuances. Second, the study analyzes the cultural and symbolic meanings encoded in cinematic portrayals of *pangku*, exploring how these gestures reflect societal norms, traditions, and postcolonial legacies. Third, it interprets how *pangku* gestures contribute to Indonesia's soft power by shaping perceptions of national identity and cultural values on a

global stage. Collectively, these objectives provide a holistic understanding of *pangku* as both an affective narrative element and a strategic cultural instrument for international influence.

To guide this inquiry, the study poses the following research questions: How is *pangku* represented as a form of embodied intimacy in Indonesian films, and what specific relational or emotional dynamics does it communicate? What semiotic meanings are conveyed through this gesture, and how do audiences interpret its cultural and symbolic significance? How can a postcolonial reading of *pangku* reveal historical, social, and ideological influences embedded in cinematic representation? Finally, in what ways does the depiction of *pangku* enhance Indonesia's cultural projection and soft power, contributing to the nation's visibility and influence in international cultural and diplomatic arenas? These questions collectively frame the study's focus on the intersection of gesture, narrative, culture, and international relations, emphasizing both the micro-level of personal interaction and the macro-level of cultural diplomacy.

Building on these foundations, the study situates *pangku* within broader theoretical and practical discussions about embodied gestures, semiotics, postcolonial identity, and soft power. By examining how a culturally specific act of intimacy functions within cinematic narratives, the research illuminates the ways in which film mediates emotional, social, and political meanings. The study thereby contributes to multiple fields—including film studies, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and international relations—offering a model for analyzing how localized cultural expressions can carry global significance. Ultimately, the research underscores the capacity of cinema to operate simultaneously as a medium of personal storytelling and as a vehicle for projecting national identity, demonstrating the intertwined nature of culture, emotion, and international influence.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Embodied Intimacy

Embodied intimacy refers to the ways in which relational closeness, care, and emotional attachment are expressed through the body. It encompasses gestures, touch, posture, and physical proximity that communicate affective meaning beyond verbal language. In cinema, embodied gestures such as *pangku* serve as visual indicators of emotional depth, relational hierarchy, and social bonding, allowing filmmakers to portray complex interpersonal dynamics subtly and effectively. For instance, a *pangku* gesture can signify protection, trust, or authority depending on the context, the characters' relationships, and the narrative framing (Yultisa et al., n.d.).

Beyond its immediate emotional impact, embodied intimacy also operates as a site for negotiating social norms and moral expectations. In Indonesian cinema, gestures like *pangku* communicate culturally specific understandings of care, responsibility, and relational propriety, reinforcing social hierarchies or, in some cases, challenging them. While film studies and cultural analysis have highlighted the importance of bodily expressions in conveying meaning, analyses that focus specifically on Indonesian cinema remain limited. Few studies have investigated how gestures like *pangku* function simultaneously as narrative devices and cultural expressions, leaving a gap in understanding the multilayered ways in which intimacy, care, and authority are portrayed on screen (Panjaitan & Putri STKIP Budidaya Binjai, n.d.).

2.2 Cultural Semiotics

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, provides a framework for understanding how meaning is created and communicated through cultural texts. In cinema, gestures, props, visual motifs, and spatial arrangements operate as semiotic signs that convey societal norms, ideological perspectives, and affective structures (Rahmadanta Sitepu & Yultisa, 2024). The gesture of *pangku*, for example, can simultaneously signal protection, authority, emotional dependency, or social hierarchy depending on its cinematic presentation.

As a semiotic site, *pangku* carries multiple layers of meaning. It not only communicates relational and emotional dynamics but also encodes cultural values, moral expectations, and social conventions. By analyzing *pangku* semiotically, scholars can uncover how Indonesian cinema communicates broader social ideologies and cultural narratives through embodied gestures, demonstrating that gestures are not merely aesthetic choices but also potent carriers of symbolic and cultural significance. Moreover, semiotic analysis helps to link individual acts of intimacy with collective cultural consciousness, illustrating how audiences interpret gestures both within and beyond local contexts (Dosen & Sriwijaya, 2023).

2.3 Postcolonial Perspective

Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens to examine how historical colonial power structures continue to influence culture, identity, and representation. When applied to cinematic gestures like *pangku*, a postcolonial approach allows for an exploration of how intimacy and social relations are constructed, maintained, or contested within the context of historical legacies.

In this framework, *pangku* may reproduce hierarchical and patriarchal norms inherited from colonial and traditional social structures, reflecting enduring social inequalities or authority relations. Conversely, it can also serve as a form of subtle resistance, asserting local cultural values, relational ethics, and community-oriented practices. Through this lens, gestures of intimacy become sites where historical authority, cultural identity, and contemporary expressions of care intersect, highlighting how embodied practices carry ideological and political weight. By examining *pangku* through a postcolonial perspective, researchers gain insight into how Indonesian cinema negotiates the tensions between tradition, colonial influence, and modern cultural expression.

2.4 Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

Soft power, a concept central to international relations, refers to a nation's ability to attract, persuade, and influence others through culture, values, and media

rather than coercion. Cultural products such as films are powerful tools of soft power because they communicate national identity, social values, and cultural uniqueness to domestic and international audiences (Zanella et al., 2024).

In the context of Indonesian cinema, gestures like *pangku* transmit culturally specific norms and emotional values that resonate globally. By depicting familial intimacy, emotional care, and social cohesion, films showcase Indonesia's cultural richness, providing foreign audiences with accessible points of engagement. The international reception of such representations contributes to cultural diplomacy, enhancing Indonesia's visibility and attractiveness on the global stage. Through these embodied gestures, Indonesian cinema not only entertains but also strategically communicates national identity and societal values, positioning itself as an instrument of soft power that bridges local culture with global audiences (Zanella et al., 2024).

2.5 Research Gap

Despite existing studies on intimacy, embodied gestures, and soft power individually, few integrate these perspectives to analyze specific cultural gestures within Indonesian cinema. Most prior research focuses either on literary or cinematic representations of emotion or on broader discussions of national image and cultural diplomacy, without examining how particular gestures operate at the intersection of narrative, semiotics, postcolonial identity, and international relations.

This gap underscores the need for a multidisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis, film theory, postcolonial studies, and international relations (Pendidikan Bahasa et al., 2020). Such an approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how gestures like *pangku* function as both intimate expressions and instruments of cultural projection. By situating *pangku* within this framework, the study highlights the multidimensional role of embodied gestures in shaping narrative meaning, reflecting cultural

values, negotiating historical legacies, and projecting national identity on a global stage.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using narrative and postcolonial interpretive methods to explore *pangku* as both an intimate gesture and a vehicle of cultural meaning (Yultisa et al., n.d.). The primary data sources include four contemporary Indonesian films released in 2024 that feature prominent *pangku* scenes. In addition, five Indonesian film scholars were interviewed using a semi-structured format to provide insights into the cultural, cinematic, and diplomatic significance of *pangku*. Data collection involved detailed scene observations and coding, focusing on the context, duration, and relational dynamics of the gesture, while interviews were recorded and transcribed to capture comprehensive interpretations of its meanings.

The data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes, complemented by a postcolonial lens to trace cultural, historical, and ideological significances embedded in the films (Ray et al., 2025). The analysis also considered how *pangku* contributes to Indonesia's soft power by projecting cultural values and national identity. Ethical protocols were strictly followed: all interview participants provided informed consent, and their confidentiality was maintained. The films analyzed are publicly available and properly cited, ensuring compliance with copyright and intellectual property regulations (Salle et al., n.d.).

IV. RESULTS

Analysis of the selected films reveals that *pangku* operates on multiple interconnected levels, functioning both as a gesture of relational intimacy and as a medium for conveying social, cultural, and historical meaning. On a personal level, *pangku* communicates care, protection, trust, and emotional closeness between characters, enabling filmmakers to depict complex relational dynamics without relying solely on dialogue. The physical act of holding or sitting someone on one's lap conveys a depth of

emotion that verbal interaction alone may not capture, illustrating the nuanced ways in which bodies convey attachment, dependency, and empathy. This embodied form of communication allows audiences to perceive subtle power dynamics, emotional hierarchies, and relational negotiations within familial, romantic, or communal contexts.

At the same time, the gesture reflects broader social and hierarchical structures, including age, gender, and authority relations, which are shaped by Indonesia's historical and postcolonial context. For instance, the act of *pangku* may reaffirm the authority of elders, highlight gendered expectations of care, or signal relational responsibilities within families and communities. By examining cinematic elements such as framing, camera angles, spatial positioning, and narrative sequencing, it becomes evident that *pangku* negotiates the balance between intimacy and social order, showing how traditional norms coexist with contemporary relational practices. In some cases, the gesture subtly challenges established hierarchies, presenting alternative ways of expressing care or reconfiguring power within relationships, thereby reflecting both continuity and transformation in social values.

Beyond its immediate relational meaning, *pangku* functions as a semiotic marker of Indonesian cultural identity, signaling values such as familial cohesion, mutual respect, and social responsibility. The gesture carries both affective and ideological weight, serving as a visual and symbolic expression of culturally specific ethical frameworks. Domestic audiences interpret *pangku* through familiar cultural and social lenses, recognizing the subtleties of respect, duty, and emotional intimacy embedded in the gesture. For international audiences, *pangku* offers a culturally distinctive representation of relational life, conveying Indonesian identity, emotional norms, and communal practices in a manner that transcends linguistic or geographic boundaries.

By foregrounding emotional depth, communal bonds, and culturally specific forms of intimacy, these films contribute

significantly to the projection of Indonesia's soft power. They present a positive and nuanced image of the nation, highlighting not only the artistic and narrative sophistication of Indonesian cinema but also the richness of local culture and its capacity to evoke empathy, understanding, and recognition across cultures. In doing so, *pangku* exemplifies how embodied gestures can simultaneously serve as tools for personal storytelling, social commentary, and international cultural diplomacy. Indonesian cinema, therefore, emerges as a multifaceted medium that bridges local traditions with global visibility and influence, demonstrating the power of film to articulate both intimate human experience and national identity.

Furthermore, the recurring depiction of *pangku* across multiple films suggests that filmmakers consciously employ this gesture to communicate layered meanings. Its repetition reinforces cultural norms while also inviting audiences to reflect on relational ethics, social obligations, and the interplay between tradition and modernity. By attending to both the affective and ideological dimensions of *pangku*, the study highlights the intricate ways in which embodied intimacy can function as a narrative strategy, a cultural signifier, and a vehicle for soft power, revealing the multidimensional significance of seemingly simple gestures in cinematic storytelling.

V. DISCUSSION

The analysis of *pangku* in contemporary Indonesian cinema demonstrates that intimate gestures function on multiple levels, extending beyond mere narrative or emotional devices to embody complex cultural, historical, and political meanings. From a postcolonial perspective, *pangku* reveals how Indonesian cinema negotiates historical hierarchies and colonial legacies. While the gesture frequently conveys care, protection, and emotional closeness, it simultaneously reflects embedded power relations, such as age, gender, and social status. These dynamics are informed by traditional social structures as well as the residual effects of colonialism, highlighting the nuanced ways in which postcolonial identities are performed

and contested on screen. By attending to these subtleties, the study demonstrates that cinematic gestures like *pangku* can reproduce, challenge, or reinterpret cultural norms, offering insight into the ongoing negotiation of relational and societal hierarchies in contemporary Indonesian narratives.

Furthermore, *pangku* functions as a semiotic and cultural marker, signaling broader societal values such as familial cohesion, respect, and responsibility. In cinema, the gesture becomes a site where affective and ideological meanings intersect, allowing filmmakers to communicate social norms and moral expectations without relying solely on dialogue or exposition. For domestic audiences, these representations reinforce shared understandings of intimacy and relational propriety, while for international viewers, they provide insight into Indonesian cultural practices, emotional expression, and social organization. The gesture thus operates as both a locally grounded symbol and a globally legible sign of Indonesian identity, illustrating the communicative power of embodied practices in visual storytelling.

At the intersection of culture and international relations, *pangku* also contributes to Indonesia's soft power. By foregrounding culturally resonant gestures and embodied intimacy, films convey national values, emotional depth, and social cohesion to global audiences. These portrayals serve as instruments of cultural diplomacy, positioning the nation as emotionally rich, socially cohesive, and culturally distinctive. The depiction of *pangku* in diverse cinematic contexts allows international audiences to engage with Indonesian culture in a relatable and affective way, promoting empathy, understanding, and appreciation. This demonstrates how embodied gestures in cinema function not only as narrative elements but also as strategic tools in the construction of national image and influence abroad.

In addition, the recurring presence of *pangku* across contemporary films underscores its narrative versatility and symbolic potency. Filmmakers employ the gesture to signal shifts in character relationships, emotional tension,

or moral development, making it both a storytelling device and a cultural signifier. The consistency of its portrayal reinforces cultural norms while simultaneously offering space for interpretive flexibility, inviting audiences to reflect on issues of care, authority, and relational ethics. In doing so, *pangku* illustrates how intimate gestures can operate simultaneously as micro-level expressions of human connection and macro-level conveyors of societal and cultural meaning.

Ultimately, *pangku* exemplifies the multidimensional role of film as both an artistic medium and a vehicle of cultural projection. It simultaneously communicates personal emotion, negotiates postcolonial legacies, and contributes to Indonesia's soft power, bridging local experience with global perception. This study highlights the importance of examining embodied gestures not only for their aesthetic or narrative value but also for their capacity to transmit cultural meaning, mediate social hierarchies, and participate in the global circulation of national identity. By situating *pangku* at the intersection of narrative, semiotics, postcolonial analysis, and soft power, the research demonstrates how cinematic gestures can serve as profound tools for understanding both individual intimacy and collective cultural representation.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the gesture of *pangku* in contemporary Indonesian cinema operates on multiple levels, functioning simultaneously as an intimate expression, a cultural sign, and a tool of soft power. Cinematically, *pangku* conveys care, protection, and relational intimacy, revealing the subtleties of interpersonal dynamics and hierarchical structures embedded within Indonesian society. From a postcolonial perspective, the gesture reflects historical legacies, social hierarchies, and cultural norms, illustrating how intimacy and authority are negotiated and represented on screen.

Beyond its narrative and symbolic significance, *pangku* also contributes to Indonesia's cultural projection internationally. By depicting gestures that embody emotional depth, familial cohesion, and cultural

uniqueness, Indonesian films communicate core values that resonate with both domestic and global audiences. This positions cinema as an effective medium for cultural diplomacy, enhancing Indonesia's soft power and shaping perceptions of national identity abroad.

Theoretically, this study bridges the fields of film studies, literary analysis, postcolonial theory, and international relations, offering a multidisciplinary framework for examining embodied gestures in media. Practically, it provides insights for filmmakers, cultural practitioners, and policymakers on how cinematic representations of intimacy can support cultural influence and national branding. Future research could extend this approach to other gestures, genres, or Southeast Asian cinemas to further explore the interplay between embodied cultural practices and global cultural diplomacy.

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