

## *Revisiting Collective Memory of the Nation Through Cartoon Violence*

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### **Abstract**

Rendang of Death is a short animated film that contains 38 scenes of violence, which take place in 3:30 minutes from the whole duration of the film, 6:13 minutes. Violence scenes are visualized vulgarly as well as hilarious to local audiences in Indonesia. This paper examines the function of cartoon violence in the animated short Rendang of Death. *Animation* is a visual medium that is often utilized as a strategy to convey subtext, an underlying message. Indeterminate fear of the violent act during the New Order regime in Indonesia triggered people to use subtext to hide their disapproval of the government. The indeterminate fear of violence became part of the collective memory of the nation, which was then accessed by the generation born after the New Order regime. In Rendang of Death, cartoon violence works in two ways. The first is to point out the community's approval of rendang as food that is "worth killing" to eat. The second is to challenge the indeterminate fear and persuade to move on from what happened in the past. To examine the function of the cartoon violence in Rendang of Death, the authors tried to connect the nation's collective memory with how animation conveys a subtext. The first connection is taken from rendang, food that triggers violent acts in the film. The second connection is from the violent animated scenes, mainly in a food stall. The third connection is from the animation medium itself.

Keywords: Animation, Cartoon Violence, Nation's Collective Memory, Rendang

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## Introduction

Rendang of Death is an animated short about an incident in a Minang food stall (Devine, 2021). Due to high demand, the seller is running out of rendang. The film's scene then quickly escalated from humane to brutal, where the customers were slaying each other to fight over the last slice of rendang provided. The violent act in the film includes stabbing and impaling, jabbing, puncturing, and mutilating one's body. However, all visuals use an animation medium, which helps to refract the context from brutal to comedy.

Rendang is an Indonesian dish cuisine originated from West Sumatra, usually uses meat as the main ingredient. Meat is thickly sliced and cooked together with coconut milk and herbs and spices until the meat is tender and the gravy is thickened. Rendang should be cooked for hours until all ingredients are caramelized, making it one of the most delectable foods "worth killing for". The cooking process of rendang takes time and requires complex steps; not many people are capable enough to prepare it properly. People usually buy rendang at a food stall called *Restoran Padang* (Padang/Minang food stall) to avoid some hassle in the making, which makes Padang food stalls as one of the most visited food stalls. Rendang is usually consumed with rice as the main course, with other Minang-style side dishes and sambals (spicy condiments). Although the price for a portion of *nasi Padang* (rice with rendang and other Minang-style side dishes) is not low for many Indonesian people, Padang food stalls are always full of customers.



Figure 1. Screenshot taken from the opening title of the animation, visualize the distinctive looks of the Padang/Minang food stall from the outside.

(source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgyD9Pt5HRs> Rendang of Death)

Rendang of Death is a 6:13 minutes short animated film that contains 38 violent scenes. The violent scenes begin when the customers start to exterminate each other, fighting over the last rendang. For the rest of the 3:30 minutes, viewers watch scenes with violence-related props and tools, including blood spills, mutilated bodies, scattered body parts, sharp and explosive weapons, or house appliances that utilize for the slaying. However, the violent scenes look more amusing rather than horrifying. The animation uses a style where the characters are

cartooned, and the settings, music, and dialogues are hilarious so that blood spills or any detaching parts of the body generate hilarity rather than gruesome.

Why did the filmmakers use rendang as a trigger for violence? What are the connections between rendang and act of violence in the film? To what extent are rendang and cartoon violence relevant? This article examines the function of cartoon violence in the animated short Rendang of Death.

## **Methodology**

The authors approach the methodology as a spectator to connect the film's meaning to relate with the experience as a citizen of Indonesia. Rendang of Death abstraction in its animation scenes, inviting spectator to contemplate the message (Sobchack, 2016). Using a theorem from Stuart Hall which applies encoding/decoding a message with dissemination and interpretation of its social contexts through collective understanding (Xie, et.al, 2022), authors try to read the Rendang of Death subtext to interpret its meaning.

To examine the function of the cartoon violence in Rendang of Death, the authors try to connect the nation's collective memory with how animation conveys a subtext. The first connection is from rendang, food that triggers violent acts in the film. Later, we attempt to develop a connection from the function of cartoon violence as an object of laughing. Further, both connections are associated with the nation's collective memory from when the New Order regime came to power in Indonesia.

## **Rendang as 'worth killing' traditional food**

Food has functioned more than just as a primary fulfillment. Furthermore, food has a political function. Rendang is a pride for Minangkabau tribe, one of the tribes from 1.340 tribes in Indonesia (Indonesia.go.id., 2017). Originally, rendang was a cuisine that resulted from the preservation technique, which Minang descendants developed from slow cooking techniques and spices from India. Apparently, assorted spices and the cooking process, which takes hours, shrink the water content in the rendang mixture and make it well-preserved (Nurmufida, 2017). As the Minang tribes developed the customary of traveling overseas, rendang was suited as a food supply during the traveling period. Thus, rendang becomes prominent outside Minang due to its delectable flavor. Furthermore, rendang has become the income source for numerous Minang tribes who settle outside Minang area. They open Padang food stalls that sell rendang and many additional delicious dishes, making Padang food stalls flourish outside the Minang area.

Rendang became one of the foods representing Indonesia in CNN's list of 50 most delicious foods in 2011, 2017, and 2021 (CNN, 2021). Furthermore, when rendang was selected as the number one delightful food in the world, it was celebrated by most Indonesian people, not only Minang tribe. Indonesia is a country with high index diversity which, consist of 1.340 different tribes with different beliefs and customs. The country faces countless strains related to the issue of diversity, but when it comes to rendang, the population of the country bonds by approval that rendang deserves to be the most delectable food in the world.



Figure 2. The screenshot from the animation visualizes the story when the rendang served and starts the conflict.

(source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgyD9Pt5HRs> Rendang of Death)

When food has a political function, it represents identity in the form of nationality and beliefs. When rendang's popularity has skyrocketed since CNN tipped it off as the world's best food, it functions as national pride. Its. The pride doesn't only belong to the Minang's pride but is greater at the state level pride. The Indonesian people, who are diverse in countless ways, abruptly are unified. They voted, confirmed, and celebrated the accomplishment of rendang as the most delicious food in the world.



Figure 3. The screenshot from the animation visualizes the story when a diverse group of people starts to fight over the rendang.

(source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgyD9Pt5HRs> Rendang of Death)

Although the main ingredients for rendang could be replaced with other ingredients such as chicken, eggs, oysters, or others (Fatimah, 2021), the Minang community, predominantly Muslim, makes rendang seem synonymous with halal food. When there was news about someone selling rendang with pork as the main ingredient, the public suddenly became angry and persecuted the pork rendang producer (Primadhyta, 2022).

### **Cartoon Violence as Object of laughing**

While the differences between animation and cartoons have been another subject of discussion, we may correspond that both cartoons and animation are mediums that convey meaning. When it conveys meaning, cartoon violence can be analyzed further from its function and purpose, and beforehand it contributes outcomes to the spectators.

The relationship between cartoons and violence was developed early when the animated cartoon medium was introduced. In *Fantasmagorie* (1908), one of the oldest animated cartoons, Emile Cohl, showed a stick man who was mutilated and shot by a corked bottle. In 1920, Max Fleischer's character Koko the Clown and his companion, Fitz the Dog, are seen combating each other in *Koko's Earth Control*. In Disney's (1928) *Steamboat Willie*, Mickey was beaten by his superior, and the acts of animal harm packed the celebrated dancing and singing scenes. However, watching those violent scenes in cartoons gives us enjoyment and laughter.

Cartoon violence refracts the situations from their references in real life. What we perceive in cartoon violence is the act of violence without dread of consequences that might happen in real life. No matter how brutal the action is, the characters' injuries and pain are irrelevant. The spectators experience the contrast from the diversion, which generates hilarity. Although it may be brutal and gore, a cartoon's violence is used as a part of exaggeration. Exaggeration is a necessary formula for an animation to emphasize the pleasure of watching. Acts of violence are indeed prohibited and never tolerable in real life. Somehow, watching the act of violence in the film brings pleasure because it is not real. Animation allows us to see what we will never see in real life and creates enjoyment.

### **Collective Memory of the New Order Government and Reformation in Indonesia**

As one of the newly sovereign countries in 1945, political developments in Indonesia were in line with the change in power of each regime. The New Order regime was the regime that ruled for the most extended period (1965-1998) for 32 years. This long period provides space for the nation's collective memory of when this regime was in power.

The New Order came to power in Indonesia after Soeharto dramatically overthrew the communist party rebellion in September 1965. A series of issues regarding this party's ferocity and violence in various regions emerged and created fear. Amid this situation, the New Order government emerged as a hero who saved the country from instability.

The depiction of the new order government was mainly done by institutionalizing the various achievements of the reign. Museums, films, and TV broadcasts became the product of the New Order's institutionalism. The character of the new order's government, which on the one hand is repressive and on the other side is full of political branding, has developed one of the strategies used by the community to make peace with conditions, including humor and comedy.

One of the best-selling film genres in the New Order era was comedy. Thirty-two years after 1965, the New Order government intensively carried out various developments in all fields, but there has never been any clarification of what happened in 1965. When the New Order fell in 1998, the events that marked the fall of this government were dramatic. A series of riots marked this event and spread fear and trauma. A clarification of what happened has never been officially published 24 years after the fall of the new order.

Fifty-seven years after the New Order came to power, and 24 years after the fall of the New Order, what happened has never been clarified. However, this event became the nation's collective memory for over two generations. On the one hand, New Order institutionalized its government through various museums or monuments so that the memory is eternal. However, on the other hand, along with the passing of the Reformation, historical writing began to balance (counter) by presenting other parties who offered different points of view from the historical alternatives offered.

## **Discussion**

We want to point out some essential points regarding questions: Why did the filmmaker use rendang (traditional food) as a trigger for violence? What are the connections between rendang and act of violence in the film, and why is it relevant? Why are exaggerations in the violent act in the film becoming the object of laughing?

Now that we know, some food has gained retention and popularity due to its supporter. Thus, it becomes political. Rendang has become a cuisine that unites Indonesian, a country with a high cultural diversity index, and encounters many complications regarding diversity. In Indonesia, rendang can be a reason for the country's people to unite to celebrate and to unite to persecute others. The filmmakers named rendang food worth killing for, which resonates with why violent scenes happened in the film.

Violence scenes in the Rendang of Death are a form of cartoon violence as an object of laughing since it is refracting the way it was visualized from its reference. In this context, violent references in the real world are refracted, cartooned, and animated into hilarious scenes, which become an object of laughing/fun. Additionally, animated cartoon medium creates other reality where the pain is irrelevant to any act of violence, such as stabbing, impaling, and mutilating. Without pain, any violence-related conditions and tools, including blood spills, mutilated body, scattered body parts, sharp weapons, explosive weapons, or any object or appliances which are sharp or explosive, is far from gruesome or deadly.

The way violence related to the object of laughing is inherited from a human's coping strategy to ease fear, pain, and any discomfort feeling related to being repressed. Rendang of Death is the form of suppressed indeterminate fear of the generation born many years after the New Order collapsed. Residual memory of the ferocity of the New Order from the former generations lingers and is not inherited by the way it is institutionalized through a museum or monument. However, it lingers and is institutionalized by how it remains vague and cryptic. The only way to cope with vagueness is by accessing a reality where fear and pain are irrelevant; the reality of cartoon violence.

## **Conclusion**

As an animated story, Rendang of Death is the form of suppressed indeterminate fear of the generation born many years after the New Order collapsed. The residual memory of the ferocity of the New Order from the former generations lingers and is not inherited by the way it is institutionalized through a museum or monument. However, it lingers and is institutionalized by how it remains vague and cryptic. The only way to cope with vagueness is by accessing a reality where fear and pain are irrelevant; the reality of cartoon violence.

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