

December 2022

## Sacred Sex or Purely Prostitution? Women's Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Roro Kembang Sore Tomb, Tulungagung, East Java, Indonesia

Diah Ariani Arimbi  
*Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia*

Gesang Manggala Nugraha Putra  
*Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia*

Nurul Fitri Hapsari  
*Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Arimbi, Diah Ariani; Putra, Gesang Manggala Nugraha; and Hapsari, Nurul Fitri (2022) "Sacred Sex or Purely Prostitution? Women's Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Roro Kembang Sore Tomb, Tulungagung, East Java, Indonesia," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 24: Iss. 8, Article 9. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss8/9>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## **Sacred Sex or Purely Prostitution? Women's Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Roro Kembang Sore Tomb, Tulungagung, East Java, Indonesia**

By Diah Ariani Arimbi,<sup>1</sup> Gesang Manggala Nugraha Putra, and Nurul Fitri Hapsari

### **Abstract**

The practice of seeking *pesugihan* (a Javanese term for fortune or wealth, usually achieved by visiting a sacred burial ground of a historic prominent figure or mythical beings) through free-sex rituals is one of the factors that has increased the prevalence of HIV and AIDS, especially in the Tulungagung region of East Java, Indonesia. Often under the guise of tradition, this practice is maintained without proper supervision from governing agencies. To assess this problem, this study focuses on mapping the origin and distribution of free-sex myths in the *pesugihan* ritual, especially at the burial site of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore, Tulungagung. Data from 2019 to 2021 were collected from interviews with the burial site caretaker as well as the pilgrims or visitors to the site. Through the methods of multiple or mixed discourse analysis and intertextual readings, the study finds that the burial site of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore witnessed a shift from a spiritually oriented pilgrimage to a myth-reinforced sex ritual. Why people visit the site might be driven by various motives, although there is a frequent denial that free sex plays a part in the motivation. Such denial seems to be dangerous, especially for women, as sexually transmitted diseases that women are vulnerable to are not recognized by the local government or society. This shows that women's health is still at the periphery of society, never at the center, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this challenging time, when the COVID-19 disease is prioritized, women's sexual health seems to be forgotten. Women are at risk for sexually transmitted diseases but their health is never perceived as a serious problem. This finding indicates that women's health is at stake as it seems to be put aside and considered unimportant.

*Keywords:* Women, Health, Sex, Myth, Indonesia, *Pesugihan*

### **Introduction**

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Indonesia in 2020, like the rest of the world, Indonesia suffered not only from economic breakdown but also health problems. As the COVID-19 virus has become the primary concern, other diseases such as HIV and AIDS and others are not considered as an emergency needing a fast response. HIV and AIDS in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia are left behind and not prioritized although the number of people infected by HIV and AIDS in Indonesia is on the rise. This situation is very unfortunate especially given that HIV and AIDS are highly prevalent yet overlooked because of the pandemic.

HIV and AIDS are global phenomena. Indonesia, like many other countries in the world, also suffers from HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs): "in Indonesia, there were an estimated 640,443 persons living with HIV (PLHIV) in Indonesia

---

<sup>1</sup> Diah Ariani Arimbi is a Professor of Cultural Studies and Gender, currently teaching at Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia. She received her Ph.D. from The University of New South Wales, Australia in Women's and Gender studies, and her Master's degree in English literature from The University of Northern Iowa, USA. Her interests include feminism, Indonesian women and their religious representations, and the ways women are portrayed in popular culture. She has published books, and several articles in some Scopus-indexed journals and Indonesian journals respectively.

with 49,000-50,000 new HIV infection cases in 2019" (ILO, 2019). Data from ILO even suggests that most people with HIV and STD are still in their productive years in terms of age. Health resilience in Indonesia is in jeopardy if this matter is not resolved or taken care of immediately.

East Java is the second most populous province in Indonesia. With a population of 39,293,000, it is also one of the provinces with the highest prevalence of HIV and AIDS infections in the country. As of 2018, East Java had 16,911 cases of AIDS, which is the highest in Indonesia. Moreover, East Java is second only to Central Java in terms of the number of new cases of AIDS (BPS-Statistics, 2018). One city in East Java that deserves serious attention is Tulungagung, where cases of HIV and AIDS infections continue to increase every year.

According to the Tulungagung Regional AIDS Commission report, the number of HIV and AIDS infections reported in 2011 was 207 cases. It dropped to 144 cases in 2012, but rose again to 196 cases in 2013. The number was highest in 2014 with 272 cases. Between January and August 2015, 161 cases were recorded (Arif, 2015). The location with the highest prevalence rate in Tulungagung is located in Ngujang. Ngujang and Kaliwungu are red-light districts in Tulungagung. Prostitution is prevalent at both locations but disguised within karaoke and café bars that provide rooms and booths (Taufik, 2014). A similar tourism-driven HIV/AIDS prevalence is also seen in Vietnam (Agrusa & Prideaux, 2002). This shows that the problem is not localized and that strategic solutions can be useful when implemented in other regions.

In addition to the two areas, another location suspected to be responsible for the spread of STDs is the *Pesugihan* Roro Kembang Sore. *Pesugihan* is a local term for a fortune-seeking site, which is usually a sacred burial ground of a historic prominent figure or mythical being. This particular *pesugihan* is located in Bolo Hill, in the village of Bolorejo, Kauman District. The site is situated on top of the hill and is believed to be the burial site of Roro Kembang Sore who, according to legend, was the daughter of the Ruler of Bedalem. Reputed to be a gracious noble, Roro<sup>2</sup> Kembang Sore, also called Nyi<sup>3</sup> Roro Kembang Sore, was admired and adored by her subjects (Djati, 2015).

The *pesugihan* site is crowded with pilgrims on Saturday nights, amongst whom many are sex workers. This is in accordance with one of the rituals that must be undertaken by *pesugihan* seekers, which instructs seekers to have sex with a person other than their legal spouse. This ritual of sexual intercourse is believed to be able to provide *pesugihan* in the form of wealth, property, or intangible benefits to *pesugihan* seekers. The practice of unsafe sex is of deep concern as it may further worsen the HIV and AIDS situation in Tulungagung Regency. Additionally, the exchange of so many partners between *pesugihan* seekers and sex workers also threatens the sexual health of the inhabitants of this district. Unfortunately, these health threats, and the sexual health of the people around this location, has not been a concern of government officials of the Tulungagung health office or local authorities. This situation, in particular, is even more challenging since it is related to rituals and traditions. Such rituals are said to be irreversible or not possible to change because any alteration would lessen their efficacy.

The practice of *pesugihan* through free-sex rituals is rampant not only in Tulungagung but also in Mount Kemukus. The practice is portrayed as a sign of deviation from the teachings of asceticism in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. On the one hand, pilgrims carry out the practice of asceticism for "unity, seeking God's way," but on the other hand, the practice of Javanese asceticism also aims to attain pleasure and worldly desires such as wealth, authority, and other successes (Soehadha, 2013). The culture of pilgrimage to ancestral tombs is ingrained

---

<sup>2</sup> "Roro" means "miss" in Javanese.

<sup>3</sup> In Javanese, "nyl" is a respected way of addressing a woman.

in Javanese society. Javanese people regard the tomb as a sacred place that deserves respect. This tradition originated from Hindu communities in Java who in the past worshiped ancestral spirits (Mumfangati, 2007). Over time, this tradition turned into the ritual of seeking *pesugihan* through free sex (performing sex acts with non-permanent partners).

Free-sex rituals are not uncommon in some societies in the world, especially when those rituals are associated with certain religious practices. Sacred prostitution was known in the ancient world of Near East Asia (Budin, 2008) as well as 16th and 17th century India with the similar practice done by Devadasis or temple women (Sharma, 2007). Free-sex rituals have always been associated with myths, which have played a major role by associating women with fertility and power.

Due to the prevalence of similar myths in certain places, free-sex rituals continue in those places. In the name of perpetuating tradition and desire for fortune, the impact of this practice is unfortunately often overlooked or deliberately missed. Almost no literature can be found on this subject that can shed light and lead to research to study the impact of free-sex rituals on the safety measures needed for sexual health security in the region. Therefore, this study will be a pioneer in this field of research to examine the myths circulating in the area of Kembang Sore Tulungagung, where the ritual of free sex is a means of seeking *pesugihan*. It is very interesting to dismantle the meanings of this myth because its practice has a tremendous impact on the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, primarily HIV and AIDS. It is important to examine how this sexual behavior is carried out so that prevention strategies can be formulated by mapping the sexual behavior of the frequent visitors to the sacred place to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS infection in *pesugihan*.

#### *Roland Barthes's Mythologies*

This study relies on the theoretical work of Roland Barthes in his seminal book entitled *Mythologies* (1957). According to Barthes, a myth is a narrative that is never free of its creator. As humans are the creators of myths, these are never completely free of human agendas, including social, political and economic agendas. A myth may appear to be true and right and natural, yet it is always misleading and biased (Barthes, 1957).

Why is it so important to uncover myths, especially particularly those related to sexual health security in a place like Tulungagung? According to Barthes, myths will always appear as truth or something natural (naturalness) even though these are beliefs that can change according to place and time. Barthes writes:

The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there (Barthes, 1957).

The naturalization of the concept, which I have just identified as the essential function of myth, is here exemplary. In the first (exclusively linguistic) system, causality would be, literally, natural: fruit and vegetable prices fall because they are in season. In the second (mythical) system, causality is artificial, false; but it creeps, so to speak, through the back door of Nature. This is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden - if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious - but because they are naturalized. What allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there

is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system (Barthes, 1957).

Barthes goes on to say that anything can be myth. And myth is always considered to be real and natural despite the fact that myth is never telling the truth. Myth is believed to be loaded with truth. To discover the truth, this research was carried out to study how this particular mythical practice impacted public health.

Dismantling a myth is not easy because of the entrenched thought process of society towards something that has been going on for a long time. Dismantling myth requires sharp analysis and intertextuality because a myth is considered to have "absolute truth" without paying heed to critics who dare to dismantle the "truth." A myth is part of semiology (Barthes, 1957), meaning that it must adapt to remain useful at certain times and spaces. Because myth is never neutral, it will take sides in accordance with the ideological construction that built it. It is important to dismantle myths in order to reconstruct local culture and society to find a strategy that can prevent the spread of certain infections. This has to be done urgently because these infectious diseases are spreading and may be like a time bomb if not handled properly.

#### *HIV and AIDS in a Biosocial Perspective*

Recent studies on HIV and AIDS have shown a paradigm shift, especially in the methods and approach used. In the early 2000s, researchers emphasized the research object as a powerless victim in the power-relations process that oppressed them. The current era is more focused on agency and self-empowerment. For example, research conducted by Harriot Beazley (2015) on child sex workers in the cities of Solo and Indramayu concluded that these sex workers have clever strategies of agency and negotiation so that they are not just victims of sexual transactions with their customers. Beazley also found that they would try to maximize their potential to obtain sexual agency and at the same time minimize sexual interaction with the customers that harmed them. Therefore, Beazley argues that "rights-based participatory research approach with young people who work in the sex industry" is a vital strategy "to comprehend young people's own views and perspectives of adolescent sexuality in the Reformasi [post 1998] era" (Beazley, 198, 2015). Such research gives space to challenge adultist, universalistic, moralistic views which place child sex workers as victims who lack sexual agency and desire (Beazley, 198, 2015).

Since the 2000s, research on HIV and AIDS has shifted from the study of biomedical to socio-cultural studies. This is due to the complexity and extent of problems that cannot be addressed only from a biomedical perspective (Butt & Eves, 2008). Interdisciplinary studies, especially socio-cultural integration with public health (bio-social) are now increasingly needed in the response to HIV and AIDS because such studies are related to issues of behavior, economic factors (Suyanto, 2020), and socio-cultural changes that occur in society in very specific and local contexts (Butt & Eves, 2008).

#### **Research Method**

This study uses a qualitative, explorative research approach in mapping, observing, and analyzing the phenomenon studied. The problematic notion of sacred sex in this study will be studied holistically. In addition, this study intends to do an in-depth study to understand social situations, and to find construction patterns, hypotheses, and theories. This study uses participatory research because data (both primary and secondary) are qualified and subsequently analyzed using the Barthian concept of myth. Finally, data were analyzed in a

triangulation manner by using multiple or mixed-discourse analysis by intertwining interview data and secondary sources coming from magazines. Online sources are categorized into thematic coding based on the issues that arise. These issues include the notion of sacred sex or ritual sex, fortune seeking, and women's health.

Observations and interviews with respondents have been used as data sources for this study. The observation location is the Tulungagung Nyi Roro Kembang Sore Tomb and the localization near the *pesugihan*. The object of observation is the location of the gathering place for sex workers, where sexual transactions occur, and where *pesugihan* seekers perform *pesugihan* rituals. Observations were made twice in 2019 and 2021. Interviews were conducted from 2018 to 2021. Informants were the local authority, residents living near the location, sexual workers, and the pilgrims visiting the tomb.

### *Locus of the Study*

*Pesugihan* Kembang Sore is one of the locations suspected of being the center from which HIV and AIDS infection has spread. The *pesugihan* is located in Bolo Hill, Bolorejo Village, Kauman District. The location of the *pesugihan* was the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore, who according to legend was the daughter of the Duke of Bedalem and a virtuous princess. Because of her nobility, Nyi Roro Kembang Sore was admired by both men and women while she was alive. It is also said that Nyi Roro Kembang was never married until her death (Djati, 2015).

The research location is a hill named Giri Bolo (Bukit Bolo) which was also used as a Chinese cemetery. Giri Bolo itself consists of three hills which are all made into a funeral complex. The two bigger hills are the Chinese cemetery, while the small hill, which is located further away than the others, is the burial location of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore. Giri Bolo's funeral complex was founded by Indonesian citizen Hoo Hap Gie in April 1953. However, the cemetery is now owned by the Tulungagung Regency government.

**Figure 1: Giri Bolo Seen from The Main Street Tulungagung – Trenggalek**



Source: Photo collection of the authors

Giri Bolo Cemetery can be seen from the main road from Tulungagung to Trenggalek. Bolo Hill is located on the right side of the road, in the north, and can be accessed via a small road that can be traversed by two cars. The road to the cemetery is filled with houses in the west, and stalls in the east (Figure 1). This small road is approximately 200 meters long and ends at a gate bearing Chinese characters that mark the entrance to the location of the cemetery.

The gate has an iron door and is guarded by a tomb caretaker. There is no ticket fee to enter the cemetery, but visitors are expected to provide cleaning funds to the gatekeeper. At the bottom of Giri Bolo hill, especially at night, prostitution can be found easily.

The road to the rear hill is not paved and can only be passed by one car. At the end of the road for approximately 100 meters, the researcher found a ladder that led to the top of the hill, next to Giri Bolo hill.

The foot of this small hill has become a kind of parking location for the vehicles of the tomb pilgrims of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore and residents who clean the location around the tomb. After descending from the vehicle, the researchers immediately climbed the arrangement of stairs to go to the top of the hill. The distance from the bottom of the stairs to the top is approximately 50 meters with a moderate level of steepness.

**Figure 2: Stairs Leading to The Entrance of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore Tomb**



Source: Photo collection of the authors

Arriving in front of the building, the researchers were then welcome to enter. The inside of the building was a small room measuring around 2x3 meters with a table and chairs on the inside, and two bamboo cots flanking the entrance. There was a door on the right side of the room leading to another room and another door on the inside that leads out behind the building. The walls of the room were dull white with decorated hanging calendars on the left. Sitting in the back seat of the table was the caretaker of the tomb: a bespectacled man in his 60s wearing a black safari suit and black cap.

There were pivotal important points given by the tomb caretaker: information related to the history and origins of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore, the practice of *pesugihan* rituals at the tomb location, and the practice of prostitution in the Chinese tomb complex on Bolo Hill.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore is still open to the public—business as usual, they say. Based on the observations, some visitors were wearing masks but most were not. The first observation was done in 2019 just before the pandemic but the second observation was done around October 2021. It seems that the COVID-19 virus had not reached this burial site as people did not seem to be aware that it was indeed a global pandemic.

### *The Legend of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore*

According to information provided by the tomb caretaker, the legend of Nyi Roro Kanjeng Sore dates back to the Majapahit era. At that time, Tulungagung was led by a ruler named Adipati Betak (also referred to as Adipati Bedalem or Adipati Betak Bedalem by some

sources). Adipati Betak's daughter, Kembang Sore, was said to be a beautiful girl, and there were many suitors interested in marrying her. One of these men, Lembu Peteng, was the Prince of Majapahit.

According to the caretaker, Kembang Sore's father, Adipati Betak, disagreed if her daughter would be betrothed by Lembu Peteng. So, when Lembu Peteng and Majapahit's envoys came to Tulungagung to propose to Kembang Sore, Adipati Betak killed Lembu Peteng and all Majapahit envoys. Majapahit Kingdom, who heard that the prince and all his envoys were killed by a small ruler, felt rage and declared war on the Ruler of Betak. Knowing this, the Duke then sent Kembang Sore away to escape to the forest, avoiding war. On the escape, Kembang Sore arrived on a hill and then decided to settle there. Because she often spent her own time alone, Kembang Sore finally became an ascetic and decided on celibacy. Her hermitage brought her close to the Creator and made her known as a figure having supernatural powers. Kembang Sore finally died and was buried on the hill. The hill where Kembang Sore is buried is the location of this study.

*Babad* narratives<sup>4</sup> for Tulungagung tell a different version from the caretaker version. According to *Babad* Tulungagung, Lembu Peteng was killed by the Ruler of Kanjeng who also wanted to marry Kembang Sore. The Ruler of Kanjeng also killed Kembang Sore's parents, but Kembang Sore managed to escape and lived estranged on a hill. In solitude and sadness over the death of his family, Kembang Sore then decided to become an ascetic. In her hermitage, Kembang Sore managed to get supernatural power which later made her famous in the area. Her supernatural power even reached the ears of the Ruler of Kanjeng, who of course, wanted to possess Kembang Sore's power. After sending his messenger to find out about the Kembang Sore's supernatural power, the Ruler of Kanjeng arrived on a hill that became the residence of Kembang Sore. Knowing that it was Roro Kembang Sore who owned the power, the Ruler of Kanjeng was in fear of Kembang Sore's revenge. Thus, he decided to run away. At the same time, the Majapahit Kingdom sent its governor named Gajah Mada to pursue and punish the killers of Lembu Peteng. Patih Gajah Mada then caught the Ruler of Kanjeng and chased him until finally the Duke fell into the lake and drowned. Kembang Sore did not have the intention to take revenge, because she had surrendered herself by living as a hermit. She finally decided to continue her retreat and never married until the end of her life. Kembang Sore later died and was buried in a small hill on the northwest of Bolo Hill.

In the two versions of the story, Kembang Sore, who spends the rest of her life as a hermit and keeps purity, is finally believed to be a person who has supernatural powers. Even today, Kembang Sore, later dubbed the Nyi Roro Kembang Sore, is believed to be able to give blessings to those who ask her.

Both myths told by the caretaker of Kembang Sore tomb and written in the *Babad* Tulungagung suggest that Nyi Roro Kembang Sore who died as a virgin had supernatural power. Because of that power, even today people still visit her tomb and seek her blessings. People believe that pilgrims and worshipers pay visits to the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore with many goals. Some come there to gain blessings for jobs (mostly merchants), singers to gain many fans, and some come there for *pesugihan* (wealth or fortune). In doing so, some believe that they have to perform sexual intercourse with those who are not their spouses (husbands/wives).

### *Pilgrimage and Fortune-Seeking*

Although not as famous as other tourist sites such as Mount Kemukus and Gunung Kawi, and other burial sites as sacred places for fortune-seeking and ritual sex (Gottowik,

---

<sup>4</sup> *Babad* is a story written in local languages in Indonesia (such as Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, and Madurese) containing a mix of historical events, myth, and local beliefs.



2018), the Tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore is also visited by many blessing seekers, especially on weekends. Based on the information provided by the caretaker, the blessing seekers come not only from Tulungagung and East Java regions, but also from outside Java. The motive of the blessing seekers is also very diverse. In an interview with the tomb caretaker, he believed that Nyi Roro Kembang Sore will only help seekers to fulfill positive goals. Negative goals such as harming others or damaging the business of others will not be granted.

Anton (a pseudonym) who came with a man from Kediri visited the tomb of Kembang Sore out of curiosity. Anton claimed that he and his friend had often visited sacred places like this in almost all parts of Java. He and his friends only visited the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore for pilgrimage reasons.

Anton differentiated between those seeking *pesugihan* (fortune-seeking) and pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a form of religious activity inherent in almost all belief systems. This is based on the characteristics of a belief system that has the concepts of sacred things, which can be objects, places, or figures. These objects that are considered sacred then give birth to a tendency to draw followers closer to the objects, places or things that are worshiped, which results in the practice of pilgrimage (Rountree, 2006). Among these sacred places, the dominant one in Javanese society is the tomb. The tomb is considered to have sacred meaning because it is a family resting place or the burial location of a respected ancestor. So, the people then make a pilgrimage to respect the figure who is buried in that place.

However, the practice of pilgrimage then expanded into a search for *pesugihan*. This originated from Javanese-Hindu culture when the king was regarded as a god's incarnation and had mystical powers (Mumfangan, 2007). The community then made a pilgrimage to the tomb intending to ask for mystical assistance from the deceased. Such assistance can be in the form of fortune, match, or harm. In the context of Javanese culture, the practice of pilgrimage and asking for *pesugihan* is a form of syncretism between the Kejawen (Javanese) belief system and the so-called modern religions that came after it, including Islam. The syncretism between Kejawen and Islam was initially possible because the version of Islam that originally entered the archipelago was Sufi Islam, which gave space to forms of meditation and belief in the existence of mystical power (Cochrane, 2009).

Anton's rational argumentation at the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore can also be seen from the way he looked at the *pesugihan* in the tomb. According to him, if you want to ask for something you should go directly to God, not through an intermediary such as Nyi Roro Kembang Sore. However, the pilgrimage to the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore is not despicable, according to him, because fellow Muslims must pray for each other, even those who have died, according to the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad. But unfortunately, the myth conveyed by the caretaker is very damaging to the image of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore, according to Anton. This myth represents the effort of the caretaker to legitimize his services and ultimately encourage the pilgrims or visitors to seek pleasure through free-sex rituals, done elsewhere away from the tomb.

In contrast to Anton and his friend, a husband and wife who did not want to be named believe in the benefit of this *pesugihan* practice. Unfortunately, they did not explain the reasons for the benefits they gained. They only said that this was the third time they had come to visit the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore. However, the interesting thing about this couple is that they were embarrassed when they arrived and saw the presence of the researcher. According to them, the *pesugihan* they did was not something that needed to be exhibited. They even felt embarrassed if their *pesugihan* ritual was known to their family and relatives. According to them, this was because *pesugihan* was considered as something wrong by their family and friends, or *musryik* (idolatrous) and contrary to their religious beliefs. However, the couple seemed to be trying to negotiate the *pesugihan* ritual they did. According to them, the way the

caretaker accompanied and directed them during the *pesugihan* ritual was very much in accordance with the guidance of their religion because they were asked to do good things.

With the two different perspectives of visitors to the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore, three conclusions can be drawn here. First, that myths about *pesugihan* rituals are not always interpreted by visitors. Second, the rationality of visitors often makes the presence of a caretaker questionable because the caretaker highly monopolizes the ritual and only seeks profit. Third, visitors who perform the *pesugihan* ritual are found to have shame and discomfort if their activities are known by family and relatives. The existence of the right and wrong dialectics makes the participants of the *pesugihan* become very secretive and try to negotiate the ritual myths that exist with the teachings of the religion they adhere to.

Myth means different things for different people. There is a sense of naturalness according to Barthes. For people like Anton and his friends, in the narrative of the myth lies the truth that as fellow Muslims, he and his friends pray for other Muslims. In this sense, Nyi Kembang Sore is believed to be a Muslim as well though no narrative said that she was a Muslim. For the unnamed couple who believed that their pilgrimage to Kembang Sore Tomb was a practice of fortune-seeking, this indicates that although pilgrimage for fortune-seeking is considered shameful, their desire for wealth overcomes their sense of shame and allows them to still seek blessing from Kembang Sore.

#### *Fortune Seeking and Women's Sexual Health*

As explained before, some of the pilgrims seek fortune by visiting Kembang Sore Roro tomb believing that she would give blessing to anyone who asks regardless of their gender or social or economic status. How is it then related to sacred sex or prostitution? The notion that it was sacred sex was completely out of the question. The caretaker of Roro Kembang Sore mentioned in an interview that women usually ask her blessings so that they could look pretty and be more attractive to men. Because of such a desire, women who visit the tomb and soon after the visits then perceive themselves as pretty and more attractive. Thus, then they use their attractiveness to attract men and have sex with them in return for money or material possessions. In this way, myth becomes an endorser of sexual acts that are exchanged with money or materiality. This seems similar to prostitution. Although none of the visitors confirmed that the practice of fortune-seeking through sex exists, they agreed that their visits are for a reason: pilgrimage and fortune-seeking.

Despite the fact that next to the tomb of Roro Kembang Sore there is a localization for sex workers (at the bottom of Giri Bolo Hill, at the Chinese Cemetery), visitors of the Roro Kembang Sore Tomb have never associated themselves with the sex workers there. According to the caretaker of Roro Kembang Sore, it was because prostitution was perceived negatively and "dirty" while Kembang Sore would bless people asking for good intentions. So, if women who are visitors to Kembang Sore tomb ask for blessings and then commit sexual acts, they usually do the acts at the nearby hotels, not on the site. The caretaker also continued that perhaps the location of prostitution was nearby because female sex workers would also ask blessings from Kembang Sore hoping that they would look prettier and are able to attract more clients.

Free-sex rituals cannot be separated from the burial site of Roro Kembang Sore. This is confirmed by the existence of places or stalls on the edge of the entrance of the site which are always crowded at night. This is possible due to the relatively high mobility of the migrants in the region and is supported by the poor economic conditions of the local community. This condition gave birth to a mutual symbiosis between service users (migrants who want to do *pesugihan* rituals) and service bidders (women from residential areas around the tomb site). In the end, the sex industry emerged and was associated with the *pesugihan* ritual at the tomb of

Nyi Roro Kembang Sore. However, further research needs to be done to ascertain whether the myths of free-sex rituals come from local communities that have economic needs.

Interviews with the local authority and residents surrounding the burial site, unfortunately, result in different stories. The myth of Roro Kembang Sore and its association with fortune-seeking and free-sex rituals are denied by these interviewed. Other visitors in different interviews also stated similar answers. However, they admitted that after their visits, some men might go to find female sex workers in the localization at the Chinese cemetery that had existed since Indonesian struggles for independence in the 1920s.

For the sake of women's health from sexually transmitted diseases such HIV and AIDS, such denial seems to be dangerous as women (visitors or sexual workers) are not monitored for their sexual health, and thus the transmission of STDs cannot be controlled. Women's health is perceived as unimportant; thus it is placed outside the attention of local authorities or even society in general. Women are at risk of sexually transmitted diseases, yet their health is never a matter of serious concern. This emphasizes the notion that in Tulungagung, women still do not exist in the eyes of the local government and society or their presence simply is not considered important.

During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the marginalization of women's health is a very serious problem. As COVID-19 diseases are prioritized, other diseases especially HIV and AIDS seem to be left behind. In particular, women who are infected by HIV/AIDS are no longer accounted for as needing emergency support. HIV and AIDS are put aside because of the pandemic.

## Conclusion

The myth of the *pesugihan* ritual at the tomb of Nyi Roro Kembang Sore turns out to have different cultural narratives depending on the local belief system. This myth stems from the efforts to remember the figure of Roro Kembang Sore, who is well-known outside of Tulungagung. As a result, each region that recognizes this female figure will surely produce their own *pesugihan* ritual myths. However, there is one thing that is the same in these cultural narratives, namely the holiness of the figure of Roro Kembang Sore.

People visit the tomb of Roro Kembang Sore for multiple reasons, as is commonly the case with myth. One reason always denied is that free-sex rituals are done after the visit. Such denial seems to be dangerous especially for women, as sexually transmitted diseases that women are prone to are not recognized by the local government or the society. This shows that women's health is still at the periphery of society. Women are at risk for sexually transmitted diseases but their health is never considered as a serious problem. This confirms the absence of women's voices in this patriarchal world. In this study women in Tulungagung, East Java, Indonesia are still marginalized in terms of their sexual health.

Women's health in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic is in jeopardy. Since the government declared the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when the first case was detected, all resources and efforts have been mobilized to deal with this pandemic. It would be better if the central and regional governments (provinces, cities and districts) do not neglect the prevention of the HIV-AIDS epidemic during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## References

- Agrusa, J., & Prideaux, B. (2002). Tourism and the threat of HIV/AIDS in Vietnam. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 7(1), 1-10.
- Arif, S. (2015, 26 September). *161 Warga Terinfeksi HIV DAN AIDS/AIDS di Tulungagung*. Sindonews.com. Diakses 13 Januari 2016, from [http://daerah.sindonews.com/read/1048118/23/161-warga-terinfeksi-HIV dan AIDS-aids-di-tulungagung-1443196746](http://daerah.sindonews.com/read/1048118/23/161-warga-terinfeksi-HIV-dan-AIDS-aids-di-tulungagung-1443196746)
- Badan Pusat Statistik. (2010). *Penduduk Indonesia menurut Provinsi 1971, 1980, 1990, 1995, 2000 dan 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.bps.go.id/linkTabelStatis/view/id/1267>
- Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. New York: Noonday Press.
- Beazley, H. (2015). 'I just ate some chilli': identities, bodies and sexual practices of young female sex workers in Java. Linda Rae Bennett, Sharyn Graham Davies. *Sex and Sexualities in Contemporary Indonesia: Sexual Politics, Health, Diversity and Representations (Eds)*New York: Routledge.
- Budin, S. L. (2008). *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Butt, L., & Eves, R. (2008). *Making sense of AIDS: Culture, sexuality, and power in Melanesia (Eds.)*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Cochrane, J. (2009). Spirits, nature and pilgrimage: the "other" dimension in Javanese domestic tourism. *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 6(2), 107-119.
- Dirjen Pengendalian Penyakit dan Penyehatan Lingkungan. (2014). Laporan Situasi Perkembangan HIV DAN AIDS dan AIDS di Indonesia Tahun 2014. Jakarta.
- Djati, W. (2015). *Cerita Pesugihan: Pesugihan Kembang Sore yang terkenal di Tulungagung*. Realkismis.blogspot.com. Retrieved January 13, 2016, dari <http://www.kangsambas.com/2015/04/cerita-pesugihan-pesugihan-kembang-sore.html>
- Gottowik, V. (2018). Pilgrims, Prostitutes, and Ritual SeKs: Heterodox Ritual Practices in the Context of the Islamic Veneration of Saints in Central Java. *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 174(4), 393-421. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27011500>
- International Labour Organization. *HIV/AIDS Programme in the World of Work in Indonesia*. Retrieved 11 January 2022. [https://www.ilo.org/jakarta/whatwedo/projects/WCMS\\_737618/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/jakarta/whatwedo/projects/WCMS_737618/lang--en/index.htm).
- Interview with Anton (anonymous), March 2019.
- Interview with the caretaker, March 2019.
- Interview with the local authority, October 2021.
- Interview with the unnamed couple, March 2019.
- Mumfangati, T. (2007). Tradisi Ziarah Makam Leluhur pada Masyarakat Jawa. *Jantra Jurnal Sejarah dan Budaya* 2, no. 3: 152–158.
- Rountree, K. (2006). Performing the divine: Neo-pagan pilgrimages and embodiment at sacred sites. *Body & Society*, 12(4), 95-115.
- Sharma, K. (2007). The social world of prostitutes and Devadasis: A study of the social structure and its politics in early modern India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(1), 297-310.
- Suyanto, B., Hidayat, M. A., & Wadipalapa, R. P. (2020). Sexual exploitation and violence of prostituted children. *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan dan Politik*, 33(2), 134-145. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20473/mkp.V33I22020.134-145>
- Soehadha, M. S. M. (2013). Komodifikasi Asketisme Islam Jawa: Ekspansi Pasar Pariwisata dan Prostitusi di Balik Tradisi Ziarah di Gunung Kemukus. *Harmoni*, 12(1), 101-115.

Taufik, M. (2014). *Penderita HIV DAN AIDS/AIDS di Tulungagung meningkat*. Merdeka.com. Diakses 13 Januari 2016, <http://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/penderita-HIVdanAIDSaids-di-tulungagung-meningkat.html>.