

Framing the Global South Through Film: Postcolonial Representation of Indonesia in *Riders of Destiny*

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Abstract

*This study examines *Riders of Destiny* (2019), a German documentary portraying pacoa jara, the child-jockey horse-racing tradition in Sumbawa, Indonesia. While the film highlights risk such as injury and disrupted education, it frames the practice almost exclusively as child exploitation, offering a narrow view that overlooks its historical, cultural, and economic significance. Using a postcolonial framework grounded in Orientalism and representational politics, this study analyses the film's content, narrative framing, and production context to explore how Western documentaries construct knowledge about the Global South. The findings show that the documentary's selective interviews, aesthetic choices, and Western festival circulation reinforce a humanitarian narrative that positions Germany as a moral authority while marginalising local perspectives. Rather than denying concerns about child welfare, the study argues that understanding pacoa jara requires attention to community-based meanings that cannot be reduced to a universal Western standard.*

Keywords: Colonial Gaze; Cultural Framing; Documentary Film; Global South; Indonesia; Orientalism; Postcolonial Representation

Introduction

The late twentieth century saw the rise of decolonisation across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, yet the legacies of colonialism continue to shape global cultural and political relations in subtle and enduring ways (Mishra and Hodge 2005). These legacies extend beyond economics and governance, influencing the cultural frameworks through which societies interpret and represent one another (Young 2012). Film is one of the most influential mediums through which such representations circulate, often reproducing unequal power dynamics between the West and the Global South.

Scholars argue that cinema frequently relies on a colonial gaze, portraying non-Western cultures as exotic, primitive, or morally deficient (Columpar 2002; Ponzanesi and Waller 2012). Such portrayals enact an Orientalist vision, as theorised by Said and other post-colonial scholars, in which Western discourse constructs simplified images of the “Other,” reinforcing Western authority while diminishing local knowledge (Weaver-Hightower and Hulme 2014). These representational practices are particularly visible in documentaries, where claims of objectivity can mask interpretive biases.

This article examines *Riders of Destiny* (2019), a German documentary directed by Michael Niermann and produced by Seventyone Films, a Cologne-based production company. The film follows Sila, a seven-year-old child jockey from Sumbawa, Indonesia, and documents aspects of *pacoa jara*, the region’s traditional horse-racing practice. The production was carried out entirely by a German creative team, including producer Frederic Bohse and cinematographer Jakob Preuss (Niermann 2019). Based on publicly available production information, there is no indication that Indonesian collaborators, co-producers, cultural advisors, or Sumbawan community representatives participated in the film’s production process.

After completion, the film circulated primarily through international documentary festivals—such as the German TV Award (2019), the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (2019), the Peloponnisos International Documentary Film Festival (2019), and the EQUUS International Film Festival (2021)—with no recorded screenings in Indonesia. Its distribution exclusively in European and North American cultural venues indicates that the film was oriented towards international rather than Indonesian audiences. The film’s portrayal of Sumbawan culture raises broader questions about Western documentary methods and the ways they construct meaning about non-Western societies. The limited inclusion of local voices—such as community elders, cultural leaders, and practitioners—creates an imbalance in interpretive authority, positioning the filmmakers as arbiters of cultural meaning while sidelining Sumbawa’s own perspectives. This is significant because *pacoa jara* holds deep social, economic, and symbolic meaning that extends far beyond the film’s narrow focus on danger and exploitation.

In response, this article analyses *Riders of Destiny* through a postcolonial framework, focusing on representation, Othering, and power. The aim is to examine how the film constructs cultural meaning, how it shapes global perceptions of Indonesia, and how its narrative choices contribute to broader patterns of Western interpretation over local knowledge. By foregrounding context and cultural specificity, this study highlights the

importance of understanding non-Western traditions through the perspectives of the communities to which they belong.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study examines *Riders of Destiny*, a documentary film, through a postcolonial lens. The analysis is grounded in Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1977, 2014), which explains how Western discourse produces simplified and hierarchical images of non-Western cultures, positioning them as backward, vulnerable, or in need of external guidance (Loomba 2005). To connect these ideas specifically to film, the study draws on postcolonial media theory, particularly Shohat and Stam's (1994) critique of the colonial gaze, which highlights how Western visual media often frames the Global South through exoticism, victimhood, or moral judgement. Berghahn's (2021) concept of exoticism in European cinema further illuminates how non-Western practices are aestheticised or simplified to fit Western expectations, often prioritising emotional appeal over cultural accuracy. These frameworks collectively provide the analytical tools needed to examine how the documentary constructs cultural meaning, authority, and otherness.

Methodologically, this study applies an integrated framework adapted from Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis's content-concept-context analysis, modified to align with established postcolonial film scholarship. Content analysis (form) examines visible film elements—camera angles, colour grading, editing, music, and scene composition—to explore how visual techniques shape emotional responses and moral interpretations (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2008; Brylla 2018). Conceptual analysis considers themes, narrative framing, and representational strategies (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008; Fedorov, 2023), identifying how the film constructs child jockeying and *pavoa jara* through discourses of risk, exploitation, and humanitarian concern. Contextual analysis examines production background, German authorship, and international festival circulation (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2008; Portegies 2010), situating the documentary within broader Western humanitarian and media structures that often shape how non-Western cultures are interpreted globally.

By integrating these analytical layers, this study approaches *Riders of Destiny* as a postcolonial media text—one that constructs meaning not only through what is shown on screen but also through strategic omissions, narrative emphasis, and representational choices. This unified framework enables a comprehensive examination of how the film participates in wider patterns of Western representation of the Global South and how such portrayals

may overshadow locally grounded understandings of *pacoa jara* and Sumbawan cultural identity.

The Plot of *Riders of Destiny* (2019)

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

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

Postcolonial Analysis of *Riders of Destiny*

Content Analysis

From its opening moments, *Riders of Destiny* takes a clear stance against the tradition of child horse racing (*pacoa jara*) in Sumbawa. This stance is conveyed through visual language that foregrounds two central issues: child exploitation and poverty. The film is defined by cool colour grading, with blues and greys dominating the palette. In visual storytelling, cool colours are often used to create a calm, soothing atmosphere typically associated with nature. In this film, however, the colouring does more than set the mood — it takes on a character of its own and helps shape the emotional arcs of both main and supporting characters. Many films and photographic works use colour in this way to deepen characterisation and storytelling (Paksi 2021). In *Riders of Destiny*, dark green, brown, and grey tones reinforce the sombre reality faced by the child riders, who are caught between poverty and their profession. These colours not only exist alongside one another but also blend to produce darker tones.

In the opening scenes, *Riders of Destiny* introduces a palette dominated by dark greens and greys, particularly in moments when Sila prepares to ride. While green often conveys balance, its combination with grey can generate unease, tension, or emotional distance (Kovsh and Dziuba 2022). This tonal mixture appears repeatedly throughout the film, including scenes of Sila leading his horse or walking alongside his father, creating a subdued atmosphere that encourages viewers to read these everyday activities as weighted or emotionally charged. Brown is also applied consistently, especially in depictions of Bima’s landscape and modes of transportation. Although typically associated with natural or rural settings, brown can take on negative associations when used in contexts that suggest deterioration or hardship (Kim et al. 2014). In this documentary, the colour scheme contributes to a restrained visual tone that guides the viewer’s emotional orientation without explicitly defining the cultural meaning of *pacoa jara*.

To demonstrate how visual aesthetics contribute to ideological framing, Table 1 systematises the dominant colour palettes used in key scenes. The table is not included merely for descriptive illustration; rather, it provides visual evidence supporting the argument that recurring desaturated tones construct an atmosphere of hardship and emotional restraint that shapes viewers’ moral interpretation of *pacoa jara*.

Table 1. Dominant colour grading in *Riders of Destiny*

	The first scene of the film featuring Sila preparing to ride is dominated by pale grey (#aebcb0), pale olive green (#92a792), dark olive green (#2e332c), charcoal grey (#282c2f), and greenish-black (#171c1d). These hues evoke a sense of intimidation and fear.
	In the scene depicting the atmosphere of Bima City, Sumbawa, the use of traditional horse-drawn carriages and motorcycles as transportation reflects the city’s local character. The colour palette, including cream brown (#9F8260), greyish brown (#796F64), mahogany brown (#504235), dark olive brown (#4C423C), and dark brownish-black (#382C26), is used to

	emphasise the city's "traditional" feel, subtly suggesting associations with underdevelopment and poverty.
	In another scene showing Sila leading a horse, the dominant colours—greenish grey (#6E7471), dark grey (#383636), dark brownish-black (#3C3133), brownish-black (#2D292D), and charcoal black (#19181C) — create a sombre, oppressive atmosphere. Through this subdued colour scheme, the filmmaker highlights Sila as the focal subject, drawing the audience's attention to the weight of his journey.
	The scene featuring Sila with his father uses a colour palette dominated by stone green (#444946), carbon green (#3B4243), charcoal blue (#393B3F), dark greyish-black (#33383C), and charcoal black (#1D1F21). This palette imparts a dark and isolating mood, evoking sensations of solitude and emptiness.
	In the film's closing scene, where Sila is racing his horse, the dominant colours are khaki (#C0B99C), greyish brown (#675442), walnut brown (#504235), greenish grey (#697B79), and bluish grey (#47575C). These colours evoke an overall sense of melancholy and hopelessness.

Source: Author

The film's heavy use of muted browns, greys, and desaturated greens constructs an atmosphere of hardship and decline. These colours evoke a mood of exhaustion and stagnation, shaping the viewer's emotional experience of Sumbawa as a bleak and impoverished landscape. Such aesthetic choices contribute directly to the film's ideological message: by visually coding the environment as dark and hopeless, the documentary

reinforces the postcolonial trope of the Global South as a space defined by suffering and lack. This representation obscures the cultural richness and communal dimensions of *pacoa jara*, reducing the tradition to a symbol of poverty rather than acknowledging its social, economic, and symbolic significance. Through its colour palette, the film therefore participates in a broader pattern of Western media framing non-Western communities as culturally deficient and in need of external moral judgement.

Beyond the nuanced application of colour grading, the filmmaker's intention to depict poverty and child exploitation is discernible through the strategic use of camera angles in portraying the film's subjects. The significance of camera angles lies in their ability to construct power dynamics between characters. Camera angles serve as one of the film's most deliberate visual tools in shaping how viewers interpret Sila's position within *pacoa jara*. As scholars note, the height and orientation of the camera can subtly communicate relational dynamics, signalling neutrality, authority, or vulnerability (Savardi et al. 2023; Hanmakyugh 2020). In *Riders of Destiny*, interviewees are generally framed at eye level, establishing a sense of balance and direct engagement. Sila, however, is consistently filmed from a high angle. This choice does not merely depict his physical smallness; it structurally limits his screen presence and directs the audience towards a reading of him as constrained and overshadowed. Paired with his brief on-screen participation and single interview, the high-angle framing operates as a visual shorthand for limited agency, guiding the viewer's emotional response even before any explicit commentary is offered (Lannom, 2020).

Table 2 maps the contrastive camera positioning used for Sila and Romi. By identifying these recurring visual patterns, the table substantiates the claim that high-angle framing limits Sila's representational agency while eye-level framing stabilises Romi's interpretive authority. It therefore strengthens the broader argument regarding visual hierarchy and power in the film's construction of meaning.

Beyond their technical function, these visual choices feed into a broader postcolonial dynamic in which Indonesian subjects are positioned within a hierarchy of representational power. By repeatedly framing Sila from above while presenting Romi in stable, eye-level compositions, the documentary creates a visual asymmetry that privileges the outsider's perspective. This pattern reflects what postcolonial theorists describe as a "hierarchy of seeing," where Western or Western-aligned figures become the default interpreters of non-Western realities (Shohat and Stam, 1994). In this framing structure, Sila's vulnerability is not merely aesthetic but serves to elevate Romi's critique as morally authoritative. This reinforces a familiar representational trend in Western documentary practice: local agency is diminished,

cultural traditions are evaluated through imported ethical frameworks, and meaning is filtered through external judgement (Berghahn 2021, 232).

Table 2. Camera angle in *Riders of Destiny*

	In the opening scene of the film featuring Sila’s interview, the camera angle used is a high angle, where the camera is positioned above the subject, diverging from eye-level with the audience’s gaze. This angle is used exclusively in Sila’s interview, subtly suggesting his perceived lack of agency or confinement within his circumstances.
	Conversely, in scenes depicting Romi, another subject in the film, an eye-level perspective is adopted. This places the subject on an equal visual plane with the audience, implying that Romi is viewed as more empowered or authoritative. Furthermore, Romi aligns with the filmmaker’s stance, as he regards the traditional practice of horse-racing as an infringement on children’s rights. The choice to depict Romi with an eye-level angle thus not only elevates his perspective but reinforces his alignment with the filmmaker’s critique, suggesting a shared judgement towards the practice of child jockeying.

Source: Author

Concept Analysis

Documentary films commonly adopt one of six modes—observational, expository, poetic, participatory, performative, or reflexive—each shaping how meaning is constructed for audiences (Nichols 1991). *Riders of Destiny* aligns with the expository mode, using interviews and commentary to advance a particular interpretation of *pacoa jara*. While the expository approach is designed to present logical argumentation, it can also simplify complex cultural issues when the filmmaker’s perspective becomes dominant (Nichols 1991). In this film, the tradition of child horse racing is framed primarily through the lens of child

rights violations, with limited exploration of its cultural, historical, or social significance within Sumbawa.

The selection of interview subjects further reinforces this framing. One of the most prominent voices is Romi Perbawa, a photographer who has long documented child jockeys but is not from Sumbawa. As an outsider, Romi discusses *pacoa jara* primarily in terms of risk, injury, and children's educational loss. While such concerns are valid, his account lacks contextual grounding in local cosmology, kinship obligations, or the economic role of the tradition—perspectives that could have been provided by cultural leaders or community elders. The absence of these voices results in a narrative that narrows the issue to exploitation, leaving little room for the complexity of community practices or local agency. Instead, the film relies heavily on interviews with Sila's parents, who discuss their financial circumstances, yet the editing frames these responses in ways that foreground poverty rather than cultural meaning.

The interview method in expository documentaries necessarily involves some degree of directorial shaping, as filmmakers guide conversation through targeted questions and selective editing (Rosenthal and Eckhardt 2016). Although such guidance is normal, it can also influence which interpretations appear most authoritative. In *Riders of Destiny*, this influence becomes visible in how interviewees' responses collectively emphasise socioeconomic hardship and lack of choice, aligning with the film's overarching narrative. For example, Romi's comments focus on educational deprivation and injury, while Sila's parents highlight the income gained from jockeying. Both sets of interviews ultimately support the film's framing of *pacoa jara* as inherently exploitative—an interpretation shaped as much by the filmmaker's questions as by the subjects' lived experiences.

While this framing resonates with broader postcolonial critiques of how Western or Western-aligned perspectives can dominate representations of the Global South, a stronger analysis requires grounding such claims in close textual evidence rather than generalised assumptions. By attending to how specific interview excerpts and editing choices guide interpretation, it becomes clearer how the documentary constructs authority, shapes moral judgement, and privileges certain viewpoints over others without reducing the issue to a simple West-versus-local dichotomy.

Context Analysis

Given *Riders of Destiny*'s thematic focus on tradition and culture, the filmmakers might be expected to demonstrate an informed understanding of the local context of *pacoa jara*

before offering critique. The film's portrayal of the tradition as a practice rooted solely in Sumbawa's poverty and child exploitation risks oversimplification. Historically, *pacoa jara* emerged during the Kingdom of Bima era, initially serving as an elite amusement and a form of royal self-defence training before gradually extending to wider public participation (Isnaini and Hasbi, 2020). Today, it has evolved into a cultural symbol that reinforces social, economic, and political bonds within the community (Wahyuni, Irruba'i, and Maulany, 2023). The races coincide with the rice planting season and hold considerable social value in Sumbawa, allowing local villages to showcase their best jockeys and horses and thereby strengthening collective identity and cultural continuity (Wahyuni, Irruba'i, and Maulany, 2023). From a local cosmological perspective, this timing marks a moment of communal renewal and reciprocal exchange between humans, land, and livestock — an aspect the film does not explore.

Children aged six to twelve play vital roles in this system, not merely as labourers but as participants in a family economy where horsemanship is transmitted through kin-based apprenticeship. Their skills—balance, emotional discipline, and horse handling—are acquired within familial training structures that integrate work, play, and cultural pride (Maulana, Sugiyanto, and Riyadi 2021). Success in racing enhances family honour and strengthens social networks, while the increased value of successful horses contributes materially to household income. These dynamics highlight how *pacoa jara* is embedded in moral and economic logics that differ from individualised Western frameworks, offering insight into why families continue the tradition despite its risks.

Safety issues remain significant. Injuries, inadequate protective gear, and uneven regulation pose real concerns for child welfare (Maulana, Sugiyanto, and Riyadi 2021). However, local stakeholders—including horse owners, trainers, and village elders—have increasingly called for protective reforms, demonstrating that internal debates about child welfare already exist within the community. These nuances show that *pacoa jara* operates at the intersection of cultural meaning, economic necessity, and evolving local ethics—not simply as a manifestation of poverty, as the film suggests.

Riders of Destiny, however, narrows its critique by foregrounding scenes of injury and hardship while omitting voices from cultural leaders, elders, or practitioners who could contextualise the practice within Sumbawan cosmology and family-economy realities. The film relies heavily on Romi Perbawa, an outsider, as the key interpreter of child welfare issues, which directs the viewer towards an external moral framework rather than local

understandings of agency, honour, or reciprocity. Its festival circulation in Europe and the United States further amplifies this externally framed narrative.

Postcolonial Interpretation of Indonesia in *Riders of Destiny*

At first glance, *Riders of Destiny* appears to function as a conventional human-rights documentary, foregrounding an underreported issue—child jockeys in Sumbawa—to attract international attention. However, when examined from a postcolonial cultural perspective, the film's framing of *pacoa jara* reveals a series of representational choices that simplify the practice and obscure its deeper cultural significance. The documentary adopts a child-rights lens that aligns closely with Western liberal norms, but does so without engaging Sumbawan cosmology, family economy, or the internal debates within the community about safety and reform. This absence creates an interpretive imbalance that makes local culture appear inherently incompatible with modern child-protection standards, despite the more complex realities documented in anthropological and historical literature (Isnaini and Hasbi 2020; Wahyuni, Irruba'i, and Maulany 2023).

Rather than assuming that Germany, as the filmmaker's national context, is intentionally imposing ideological dominance, it is more productive to analyse how *specific elements of the film* shape viewer perception. The documentary selectively foregrounds scenes of injury, fear, and economic hardship, while excluding local voices—such as cultural leaders, horse owners, or elders—who could situate *pacoa jara* within its social and cosmological setting. For example, the film shows Sila preparing to race in dim, desaturated tones, supported by interview material that emphasises financial strain. Yet it omits the communal aspects of the tradition, the agricultural timing of the races, or the social honour tied to the skills of young jockeys (Wahyuni, Irruba'i, and Maulany 2023). These omissions do not necessarily indicate intent to distort, but they do shape the narrative towards a single moral conclusion.

From a postcolonial perspective, this selective representation reflects what might be described as a hierarchy of seeing, in which Western-aligned figures or frameworks are positioned as the primary interpreters of non-Western practices. The reliance on Romi Perbawa—an outsider to Sumbawa—as the key commentator reinforces this hierarchy. His critique of the races, framed through the language of child exploitation, becomes the film's dominant interpretive voice, while local understandings of skill, honour, cosmology, and economic reciprocity remain unrepresented. As Berghahn (2021) notes in her work on

exoticism, such portrayals often simplify culturally complex practices into spectacles of suffering that invite external moral judgment.

The film's international circulation further amplifies this framing. Screenings at festivals in Germany, Greece, the United States, and other Western cultural spaces—without screenings in Indonesia—mean that the documentary primarily informs *external* perceptions of Sumbawan culture. This is significant not because it indicates deliberate ideological domination, but because global documentary festivals often privilege narratives that align with universalist human-rights discourse. In such spaces, depictions of non-Western childhoods as endangered or exploited carry particular emotional and political weight. As a result, *Riders of Destiny* participates in a broader pattern in which Western media construct moral authority through the representation of vulnerable non-Western subjects.

Furthermore, the production context reinforces this dynamic. *Riders of Destiny* appears to be the first documentary project produced by Seventyone Films. Based on publicly available information, no prior documentary or ethnographic productions by the company could be identified. This limited documentary profile suggests relatively little publicly documented experience with culturally embedded research or cross-cultural representation. In turn, the film's interpretive framework is shaped largely by external perspectives rather than sustained collaboration with Sumbawan cultural actors.

Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond binary claims about Western dominance. The film's influence emerges not from overt political intent but from how its selective storytelling interacts with global media structures that privilege certain narratives over others. A more culturally grounded representation—one that includes local perspectives, contextualises risks alongside cultural value, and engages with internal debates in Sumbawa—would allow the documentary to contribute to meaningful dialogue rather than reinforcing simplified perceptions. By examining *Riders of Destiny* through both film analysis and local cultural scholarship, we can see how documentary practice shapes global interpretations of non-Western traditions—and why the inclusion of alternative Sumbawan voices is essential for a more balanced understanding.

Conclusion

This study shows that *Riders of Destiny* constructs a narrow representation of *pacoa jara* by emphasising scenes of risk, hardship, and poverty while excluding the cultural, historical, and social contexts through which the tradition is understood locally. Rather than intentionally distorting Sumbawan culture, the film reflects broader patterns in Western documentary practice in which external perspectives gain interpretive authority and local voices are marginalised. Through its visual choices, narrative framing, and circulation within Western film festivals, the documentary aligns with familiar postcolonial dynamics of representation, where the Global South is viewed primarily through humanitarian or moral-critical lenses.

These findings suggest that the film's power lies not in deliberate ideological imposition but in how its selective storytelling interacts with global media structures that privilege universalist child-rights narratives over culturally situated explanations. A more balanced representation—one that incorporates Sumbawan perspectives, contextualises risks, and acknowledges the cultural significance of *pacoa jara*—would offer a fuller understanding of the tradition and challenge reductive portrayals of non-Western practices. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its focus on a single documentary and its reliance on textual analysis rather than audience reception data, filmmaker interviews, or direct perspectives from members of the Sumbawan community. Future research could address these limitations through comparative studies of Western documentaries about Indonesian cultural traditions and investigations into local responses to *Riders of Destiny*. More broadly, the analysis highlights the ethical responsibilities of documentary filmmakers when representing cultures not their own, underscoring the importance of engaging with local knowledge, diverse community perspectives, and collaborative approaches to cultural representation.

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