

# PUTERI SAADONG DAN INGATAN BUDAYA MASYARAKAT KELANTAN DI MALAYSIA: SATU PEMERHATIAN DI TEMPAT BERSEJARAH

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## Abstrak

Dalam sejarah Kelantan, Puteri Saadong memainkan peranan penting sehingga kini. Tokoh lagenda ini mempunyai hubungan rapat dengan bukit Bukit Marak di Kelantan. Bukit ini sering dikunjungi oleh penduduk tempatan dari dalam dan luar Kelantan. Pasukan penyelidik telah meneroka tempat-tempat bersejarah ini untuk menghuraikan maknanya kepada masyarakat. Puteri Saadong dan kisahnya masih penting dalam kehidupan seharian masyarakat Kelantan. Pasukan penyelidik telah menjelaskan dan menganalisis sejauh mana kisah Puteri Saadong mempengaruhi ingatan budaya masyarakat Kelantan. Penyelidik telah mengikuti Jan Assmann dan Maurice Halbwachs untuk latar belakang teori yang digunakan dalam kajian ini. Penyelidikan ini bersifat eksploratif, dan banyak kesan geologi yang dijumpai mengingatkan masyarakat tentang kisah Puteri Saadong. Lebih-lebih lagi, terdapat pasangan yang bersifat kontroversi dalam cerita itu sendiri yang mengingatkan orang ramai tentang cara hidup yang benar

**Kata Kunci:** Budaya, Memori, Sejarah Kelantan, Malaysia, Puteri Saadong

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# PUTERI SAADONG AND THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF THE KELANTAN PEOPLE IN MALAYSIA: AN OBSERVATION IN HISTORICAL PLACES

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## Abstract

*In the history of Kelantan, Puteri Saadong plays an essential role to this day. This legendary figure has a close relationship with Bukit Marak hill in Kelantan. This hill is often visited by locals from in and outside Kelantan. Therefore, the research team has explored these historical places to elaborate on their meaning to the community. Puteri Saadong and her story are still important in the different daily lives of the Kelantan community. The research team has described this fact and analyzed the extent to which it influenced the cultural memory of the Kelantanese community. Furthermore, the researchers have followed Jan Assmann and Maurice Halbwachs as the theoretical background used in this study. The research was explorative by nature, and it was detected that many geological formations remind the people of the story of Puteri Saadong. Moreover, binary pairs of opposition within the story remind the people of an ideal way of life.*

**Keywords:** Cultural, Memory, History of Kelantan, Malaysia, Puteri Saadong

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## 1.0 Introduction

Princess (*Puteri*) Saadong is a famous legendary figure in Malaysia, particularly in Kelantan. She was the daughter of Raja Loyor and was adopted by Cik Siti Wan Kembang, the queen of Kelantan. When she was a young lady, she got married to Raja Abdullah. In the following years, the army of the king of Siam kidnapped her. However, Puteri Saadong had extraordinary abilities and could protect her chastity. On the other side, Raja Abdullah went to marry another woman. When the King of Siam released her, Puteri Saadong returned to her husband, Raja Abdullah. The princess got to know that her spouse had married another lady.

As a consequence, she became furious and stabbed Raja Abdullah. After that event, she had to run away with her followers. She found a new residence in the forest at Bukit Marak. What happened afterwards is not clear: She had to leave Bukit Marak and went most likely to the mountain known as Gunung Ayam in the interior of Kelantan, where she passed away. Many Malays know the legend of Puteri Saadong. The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers some definitions of the term 'legend'. It denotes a story that is coming down from the past, but it is historically not verifiable (Merriam-Webster, 2020). In traditional Malay literature, this type of story is called *hikayat* and is often related to the events of a royal family or person.

In this research, the team intends to look at the legend of Puteri Saadong by focusing on the cultural memory of Malay society. There are some theoretical concepts about cultural memory. This research focuses on the work of Maurice Halbwachs (2003) and his concept of communal memory. It also focuses on the research of Jan Assmann (1998) and his concept of cultural memory. Both concepts look into that topic from different perspectives. The story of Puteri Saadong can be observed by looking at the geographical formations that are related to the story. On the other side, the person itself can be analyzed. Some features of the character of Puteri Saadong show how to behave in certain situations in an ideal-typical way.

The objectives of this article are the following:

1. To explore the collective memory of the legend of Puteri Saadong for the Malay people nowadays.
2. To show in an exemplary way that legends are still of importance for the Malay society.

## 2.0 Literature Review

The legend of Puteri Saadong is well-known in many children's books and traditional publications. For example, in the book *Hikayat Puteri Saadong*, the story of Princess Saadong is described in a very concise way with illustrations. The intention of publishing such books is to preserve national heritage by attracting children as readers. The princess is described as a loyal person who was forced to leave her husband and move to Siam. When she returned, she met her husband, who had married another woman. Therefore, Puteri Saadong became angry and stabbed him. The story ends here and describes that the princess decided to live in isolation. This fact is interesting, as many places related to her, like Bukit Marak, are not mentioned.

Some researchers perceive the legend of Puteri Saadong from different perspectives. Some of these publications refer to the traditional text *Hikayat Seri Kelantan*. Puteri Saadong is closely



related to the history of the Malaysian state of Kelantan. Researchers like Nor Huda Ahmad Razali and Norazimah Zakaria (2018) examine gender-specific issues. According to the authors, Puteri Saadong embodies some ideal features that should be found among Malay women. Some of these characteristics are displaying strong belief and loyalty to the husband. Thus, it can be concluded that Puteri Saadong represents an ideal character that can be a role model for other women.

Mohd Nizam Sahad and Nurul Suhaida Ibrahim (2016) focus on elements related to folk beliefs. In local Malay entrepreneurs of Kelantan, there is a fear that their business might be disturbed by black magic. Therefore, they try to protect themselves. Puteri Saadong has some esoteric capabilities. She could defend herself because of these powers. Therefore, some entrepreneurs possess a type of hair that some people call 'the hair of Puteri Saadong'. Some people think that this 'hair' has some protective power. Both authors analyze such types of amulets in relation to Islamic sources. It is interesting that 'elements' related to Puteri Saadong play their role in today's life. Other researchers focus on the fact that the hairpin of the princess could be used as a weapon (Sudirman Kiffli et al. 2019). Furthermore, it should be noted that the legend of Puteri Saadong has the potential to attract tourists, like the grave of Raja Abdullah (Amran Hamzah et al., 2008). It is still well maintained and related to the legend. Another interesting place is the hill of Bukit Marak (Majlis Daerah Bachok, n. d.). Tourism can be an important factor in preserving national heritage.

### 3.0 Theoretical Background

If someone talks about 'memory', they usually assume that it is related to the physiology of the brain. However, there is a type of memory that refers to an 'external' dimension. According to Jan Assmann, there are four types of memories (Assmann, 2007, pp. 20-21):

- 1) Mimetic memory refers to acting. For example, a child learns how to behave when it observes and imitates the mother;
- 2) the memory of things (like chairs, furniture, and so on). Certain things are related to memory. Whenever a person looks at them, then some memories come into the mind;
- 3) the communicative memory, which refers to language and the act of communication, and
- 4) the cultural memory.

Jan Assmann made an essential contribution by looking at the topic of mnemohistory. He defines the objectives of the term 'mnemohistory' as follows: "Unlike history proper, mnemohistory is not concerned with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered" (Assmann, 1998, pp. 8-9). He mentions the example of Moses: There is a historical Moses, but there is also a Moses how the people see him. Similarly, we can look at Puteri Saadong. On one side, there are things related to history, but on the other side, there are elements in the people's mind. Therefore, Assmann stresses the following things when he looks at the story of Moses: "The aim of mnemohistorical study is not to ascertain the possible truth of traditions such as the traditions about Moses but to study these traditions as phenomena of collective memory" (Assmann, 1998, p. 9). This quotation from Assmann could serve as a motto for this research about Puteri



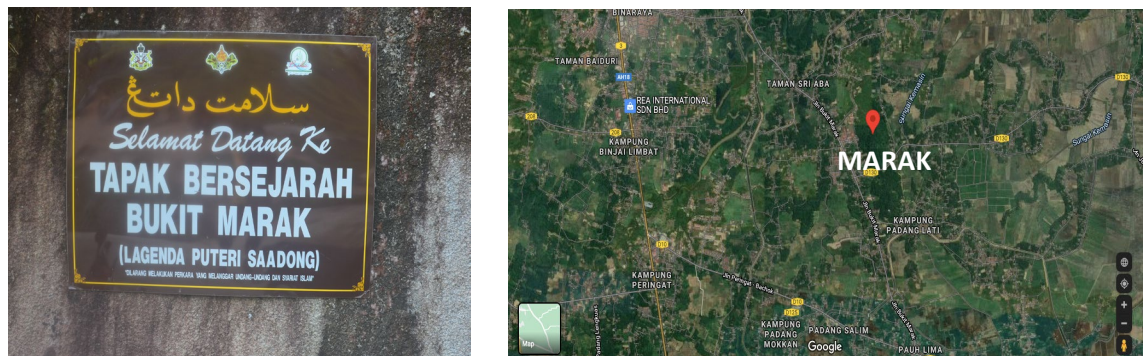
Saadong. The researchers do not look at whether the events of Puteri Saadong took a 'really' place but focus on historical events and how they influence the collective memory.

Another perspective that has to be taken into account is to look at the objects. Particularly certain geological and geographical locations are related to the legend of Puteri Saadong. The researchers were inspired by Maurice Halbwachs's (2003) research, who looked at biblical places. Some of these places are related to specific stages of the life of biblical figures. In many religions, geographical landmarks remind the people of specific events. For example, the cave of Hira in Mecca reminds the people of the event when parts of the Qur'an were revealed for the first time (Denffer, 1994).

Consequently, the cave itself told the people about this event. The geographical locations are not only of interest for religious events but for other historical incidents too. Even legends are connected to particular places. In many locations of the world, there are certain rocks or formations that remind the people of legendary events. A good example can be the stones on the beach of Air Manis in West Sumatra. The rocks have the shape of a ship, and the local population relate these stones to the story of Malin Kundang, who was famous for being undutiful towards his mother (Neven, n.d.). Similarly, geological formations are reminiscent of objects in the story about Puteri Saadong. Furthermore, it should be analyzed whether the geological landmarks influence cultural memory.

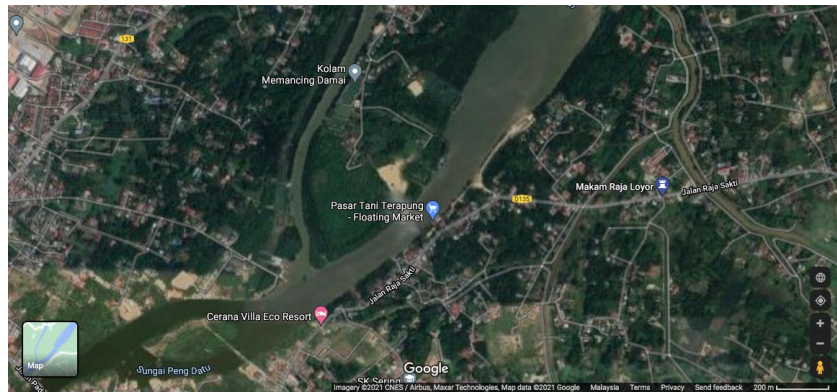
#### 4.0 Research Setting and Research Method

This research was conducted in the Malaysian State of Kelantan. The stations of Puteri Saadong's life are related to different areas of this state. The first task was to get an overview of the historical places. The most important places that are connected with Puteri Saadong are:



**Figure 1:** Bukit Marak (a hill on the outskirts of Kota Bharu)  
(Photos Y. Kurniawan, 2019)

Bukit Marak is located in the Bachok area, Kelantan, which is approximately 24 km or 15 miles south of the capital of Kelantan, Kota Bharu



**Figure 2:** Kota Jembal (a small town and the capital of the former kingdom of Jembal) (Photos Y. Kurniawan, 2019)

In Kota Jembal, there is the tomb of Raja Loyal Bin Raja Sakti, the father of Princess Saadong. The tomb area was the area of Jembal palace in the past

Other historical places in Kelantan that are related to Puteri Saadong are:



**Figure 3:** Taman Serendah Sekebun Bunga (a park beside the Kelantan river)  
(Photos Y. Kurniawan, 2019)

Taman Serendah Seindah Sekebun Bunga is believed to have been developed by Her Majesty Cik Siti Wan Kembang as a stopover and rest place. This place is also a stopover for Princess Saadong on Mount Chinta Wangsa or Mount Ayam today.



**Figure 4:** Gunung Ayam (a mountain in the interior of Kelantan).  
(Photos Y. Kurniawan, 2019)

Gunung Ayam, formerly known as Gunung Chinta Wangsa, was believed to be the centre of Her Majesty Cik Siti Wan Kembang's rule when she ruled Kelantan. The people also believe Gunung Ayam of Kelantan to be the last stop of Puteri Saadong with her followers before disappearing. However, it can be assumed that Puteri Saadong and the cultural memory about her are also influential in areas which are not directly connected to geological formations. Therefore, the research team also visited other places in Kelantan.

The research method was mainly explorative. The research team had no prior assumptions. The main objective was to understand whether there is a cultural memory regarding Puteri Saadong. If there is one, it must be analyzed how it looks. The research started by exploring the historical data. After the first impressions, the research team revisited the places and interviewed the local informants. Afterwards, the data were analyzed. The research team followed a qualitative approach. The team observed in a non-participant way how the people perceived Puteri Saadong. According to Jan Assmann and Maurice Halbwachs, there are two ways to trace collective memory. Jan Assmann (1998) wrote about Moses and how he is a figure who represents the collective memory of certain groups. Therefore, the research team decided to look at Puteri Saadong as a legendary figure representing elements of collective memory in an ideal way. On the other side, Maurice Halbwachs (2003) stated that specific places could form the collective memory. He took the religious places in the Middle East as exemplary.

Consequently, it was considered essential to look at historical places related to Puteri Saadong and how far they formed elements of the collective memory. During the research, it was discovered that local experts stay close to historical places. For example, there is a guardian at Taman Serendah Sekebun Bunga. It turned out that he was well versed in the biography of Puteri Saadong. Hence the researchers conducted non-structured interviews with these experts. The local historians could be asked about various matters regarding Puteri Saadong. They could even hint at which place could be interesting for further studies. Moreover, some places were hidden in the jungle, but the locals could help the research team to find them.

## **5.0 Data**

### **5.1. Geological and Natural Formations**

The first element that became obvious to the research team was that certain geological formations were closely related to the legend of Puteri Saadong. When Puteri Saadong was a child, she grew up in the Sultanate of Jembal. Her Father was Raja Loyor, and close to his grave, there is still a small pond related to Puteri Saadong (Plate 5). When the princess was small, she used to play near the pond.







**Figure 5:** The small Pond near the Grave of Raja Loyor  
(Photo A. Stark, 2019)

Cik Siti Wan Kembang was the queen of the state of Kelantan, and she was unmarried and childless (Interview with TS 27/04/2018). However, she was a close friend of the family of Raja Loyor. She liked Puteri Saadong and asked whether she could take care of her. Raja Loyor agreed, and Puteri Saadong moved to her palace. There are no remains of her palace. However, the pond beside the palace can still be visited today. The locals also reported that the pond was frequently visited by Puteri Saadong when she was young.



**Figure 6:** The Pond in Taman Serendah Sekebun Bunga  
(Photo A. Stark, 2019)

According to the guardian of the park, the pond has some mystical qualities. Sometimes the color of the water can change. One of the mentioned features of Puteri Saadong is that she is closely connected to mystical elements. The king could not approach her when she was brought to Siam, and then the king could not approach her due to her mystical features. It is remarkable that two natural landmarks that refer to the childhood of Puteri Saadong are closely related to water. Water is an element of purity and stands for life in many societies. In the Malay understanding, the body consists of four elements: water, fire, air and earth (Laderman, 1987).

Water is also essential in the daily life of a Muslim. One of the preconditions for the acceptance of the five daily prayers is cleanliness. Therefore, the believers must perform ablution (with water) before praying. A child is considered pure and without sins, thus it is probably no coincidence that the child Puteri Saadong is connected to the pure element of water. Other famous geological formations are related to events that took place after Puteri Saadong returned from Siam and after she stabbed her husband. She fled into the forest of Bukit Marak and lived there with her followers. One important geological place is the cave at the top of the hill (see Plate 7).



**Figure 7:** Entrance to the Cave of Puteri Saadong  
(Photo A. Stark, 2019)

The hill of Bukit Marak provided two main advantages for Puteri Saadong: First, it was difficult to access the hill as it was covered by dense rainforest, and second, it was close to Jembal (the hometown of her family). Nowadays, many visitors visit the cave and the other geological formations that are close. The research team witnessed some groups that were quite secretive and did not want to be disturbed by outsiders. They were asked about their presence once. The people answered that they visit different places related to Puteri Saadong. However, they did not want the researchers to ask more. Probably they were afraid that the researchers might report them doing some deviant religious acts (*khurafat*).

According to the legend, the people took the presence of Puteri Saadong for granted (Said, 2008, p. 232) and behaved not always in a proper way. Some interviewees said it was a tradition for the locals to rent some dishes from servants of the princess at the cave: “From time to time whenever there is an important event, we (the villagers) go to the cave and borrow some plates” (Interview with AM, 30/8/ 2018). However, some did not return the dishes or tried to grab the hands of the servants. Puteri Saadong decided to leave the place. All of her belongings turned into stone. After the princess leaves Bukit Marak, her story becomes unclear. On her journey to Gunung Ayam, she might have stopped at Bukit Panau. This hill is related to other legendary figures like Hang Tuah.<sup>1</sup> Puteri Saadong went to Gunung Ayam and finally disappeared. However, some people claim that she went to another mountain, namely Gunung Reng

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/45574/EDISI/Kelantan/Bukit-Panau-tersimpan-sejarah-Hang-Tuah> (retrieved June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020).

## 5.1. Puteri Saadong and how she is remembered nowadays

The story of Puteri Saadong is well-known to many Malaysians. Certain constructions and cultural events 'refresh' the memory both in a conscious and unconscious level. Many buildings and places are named after the princess, for example, the primary school just at the foot of Bukit Marak. Another example is placed in public buildings like the Laman Puteri Saadong at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (see Plate 8), a recreational place for the students.



**Figure 8:** Laman Puteri Saadong  
(Photo A. Stark, 2019)

Laman Puteri Saadong is a good example. It is an open space of a public university and it is named after the princess. In the unconscious level, the name of the legendary figure becomes familiar to the students and staff when they pass by this place which is in the centre of the campus in Bachok. Cultural events also play an important role in the evocation of memory. In Malaysia, there are theater performances, film productions or operas (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8:** A Poster that promotes the Opera 'Puteri Saadong'.  
(Source: [https://b.cari.com.my/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=1040609&extra=page%3D1retrieved 20/06/2021](https://b.cari.com.my/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=1040609&extra=page%3D1retrieved%2020/06/2021))

Performances like operas make people aware that the life story of Puteri Saadong is important. It is possible to learn more about her challenges and values. The people learn about 'ideal character traits' of a Malay woman. Puteri Saadong was a brave and loyal wife. She did not betray her husband, and she could resist the advances of the King of Siam. Furthermore, she was a just person and so many followers supported her. She was also a modest person. For sure, it was not easy to live in a remote forest with many wild animals and insects. Many elements of her life story can be seen during a performance, and it serves as a kind of learning for the spectators.

There are also mystical components that serve as collective memory. For many locals, the term 'Puteri Saadong' evokes a component that is related to strength. In the esoteric market, there are sellers who sell a small clot of hair which is sometimes named after Puteri Saadong. Some people believe that it is a kind of shield that protects people against all types of 'dangers'. Even in the area of Bukit Marak there are mystical places. For example, a stone with a pond is believed have never dried out.



**Figure 9:** Former Footsteps and Sharpening Stone of Awang Selamat  
(Photos Y. Kurniawan, 2019)

At the top of Bukit Marak were found the former footsteps of Awang Selamat, a bodyguard of Puteri Saadong, during her journey in Bukit Marak. Not far from the former site, Awang Selamat's former sword sharpener was found. The former place to sharpen the sword is often filled with water, and according to the beliefs of the local community, the water in the place is never dry, and if it wants to dry, it will rain



**Figure 10:** Former Footsteps and Sharpening Stone of Awang Selamat  
(Photos Y. Kurniawan, 2019)

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**Figure 11:** The Stone is split by Awang Selamat using A Sword  
(Photo Y. Kurniawan, 2019)

The greatness and sharpness of Awang Selamat's sword can be seen from the large stone that was split. According to the people's beliefs around Bukit Marak, the stone was split by Awang Selamat using his sword.



**Figure 12:** Puteri Saadong Cave in Bukit Marak  
(Photos Y. Kurniawan, 2019)

In Bukit Marak, a former cave was also found, which is believed to have been the residence of Puteri Saadong while she was in Bukit Marak. In ancient times, this place was believed to be where the community around Bukit Marak contacted or sought help from Puteri Saadong.



**Figure 13:** Elephant-Shaped Stone in Bukit Marak  
(Photos Y. Kurnaiwan, 2019)

At the top of Bukit Marak, a stone in the shape of an elephant is also found. The locals believe that the stone was once an elephant that Princess Saadong rode while in Bukit Marak.

## 6.0 Analysis and Conclusion

The story of Puteri Saadong contains certain binary oppositions. There are the following dichotomies:

**Table 1:** Dichotomies related to Puteri Saadong

'Outside World'	Life story of Puteri Saadong
'Normal', open	Forest (close to the mystical world), hidden
Outside the community commit sins (for example, Puteri Saadong was kidnapped); some people try to take advantage of the princess, and as a consequence, she disappears.	Water, purity, chastity
Common people	Noble/brave people
Urban life	Life close to nature

Table 1 shows that Puteri Saadong has features that make her somehow unique and distinguish her from the people around her. During her childhood, she was connected and close to the pure element of water. After she is kidnapped, she is close to the elements of nature. Slowly she ascends to high places (close to heaven). During her childhood, she is in the low land of the Kelantan River. After her return from Siam, she lived on the top of a hill, and at the end of her life, she lived on a mountain. Figuratively, the life of Puteri Saadong reflects how people's ideal life should be. They start to play around innocently, and when they become adults, they have to work for their livelihood. Many burdens and challenges will come. Finally, they intend to go to heaven and retreat from daily activities by focusing on the afterlife. The binary oppositions juxtapose the ideal features of Puteri Saadong with 'normal' people, and consequently, this shows the extraordinary and ideal way of life as shown by Puteri Saadong.

Nowadays, there are many ways to keep cultural memory alive. Naturally, geological formations remind the people of the legend of Puteri Saadong. The local government maintains these places as they are significant for tourism. Most of the visitors are Malaysians who are interested in local history. However, it can be assumed that some of these places have the potential to attract international tourists. The fascinating mix of nature and 'historical' places can be interesting for many visitors.

Many educational places like the schools 'Puteri Saadong' and 'Raja Sakti' are related to the princess. Universiti Malaysia Kelantan created an animation film about the legend of Puteri Saadong.<sup>2</sup> The government is interested in preserving national heritage by encouraging the

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.umk.edu.my/index.php/en/publication/umk-news/4-latest-news/231-ftkw-hasilkan-animasi-3d-sejarah-lagenda-puteri-saadong> (retrieved October 7th, 20202).



young generation to reflect on traditional legends and learn more about them.

The legend of Puteri Saadong also places an important role in the cultural life of the people as there are operas or movies.<sup>3</sup> The government wants to maintain the memory of traditional stories in order to preserve traditional heritage. Modern media, like movies or travel vlogs to places like *Bukit Marak*, reach many viewers and help people to remember the story of Puteri Saadong.

Finally, it can be stated that there is still a vivid cultural memory of the Malay people regarding Puteri Saadong. This memory is maintained on different levels, like cultural events and geological formations. For the people, Puteri Saadong personifies ideal character traits.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, there is a telemovie about Puteri Saadong: <http://www.umk.edu.my/index.php/en/publication/umk-news/4-latest-news/231-ftkw-hasilkan-animasi-3d-sejarah-lagenda-puteri-saadong> (retrieved October 7th, 2020)





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