

# Educating the Elders Empowering the Young The Origin of Asmat Frog

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## **Educating the Elders, Empowering the Young: The Origin of Asmat Frog, an Indonesian Folktale and its Reconstruction Version**

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### **Abstract:**

Folktales have been useful to nurture, preserve, and hand down cultural values, moral direction, as well as national identity to children. Despite having such an important role in the education of children, it is an unwitting fact that not all folktales are appropriate educative tools. Folktales can double function. While they transmit important values to nurture desired teachings, they simultaneously can portray inappropriate emotions, improper attitudes, adverse notions, stereotypical images, even unhealthy power relations. One value that has been handed down in Indonesia is of unrestrained powers that the elderly possess, as depicted in a number of Indonesian folktales. Filial piety and respect of the elders are important teachings in Indonesia and many other Asian countries. However, assessing the qualities and values being handed down through the depiction of these respected powerful elders is important but oftentimes overlooked.

This paper examines the issue of filial piety in *The Origin of Asmat Frog* to teach the elders and empower the young.

**Keywords:** children literature, Indonesian folktales, folktale reconstruction, education, human capital.

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### **1. Introduction**

Although not at first intended for children, folktales have evolved into the spheres of children's education. Folktales have been used as an edutainment tool for children (Zipes, 2002; Citraningtyas, 2010). Folktales have been useful to nurture, preserve, and hand down cultural values, moral direction, recommendation, as well as national identity to children.

The values and concerns of Indonesians also permeate through its folktales for children. One noble teaching that has been handed down in Indonesian folktales is of respect to the elders and filial piety. This two-in-one value is important in Indonesia and many other cultures in Asia. It is unfortunate that such noble value often results in unlimited exercise of power that the elderly shows to the young.

Despite having the very important role in the education of children, it is unfortunate that not all Indonesian folktales carry positive teachings. Indonesian children have grown up with folktales that transmit disturbing values despite their aim in handing down and nurturing the so-called 'noble' values from ancestors. It is an unwitting fact that folktales rarely undergo careful evaluation to assess whether the values embedded in them are still relevant to be used as a healthy form of edutainment for children (Citraningtyas, 2017)

This paper aims to assess the teachings embedded in an Indonesian folktale about the absolute power of the elderly. It focuses on a folktale from Papua, titled *The Origin of Asmat Frog*, that conveys the issues about the elderly, the children, and the power relation between them. This paper then introduces the folktale's reconstruction version, and examines the version that is more suitable to be used to educate children in today's world.

## 2. Literature Review

The Origin of AsmatFrog (MunculnyaKatak di Asmat) is a tale about a grandmother of seven grandchildren, who cursed her only granddaughter to be a frog because she had mistakenly thought that the granddaughter was part of a confederate in killing her beloved pet fish. The grandmother was the sole guardian of her seven grandchildren, after the passing of the parents. One day, the grandmother had to go away for several days to harvest some sago. She passed on the responsibility of the house to the eldest grandson while she was away. When the grandsons went fishing for food, the eldest grandson's arrow accidentally hit grandmother's pet fish. The eldest grandson then suggested that they killed and ate the fish to erase traces. They did it without the knowledge of the youngest, the only granddaughter. The six grandsons knew how the grandmother would be mad, so they fled away. The innocent grand daughter who did not run away, received all the blames and was cursed by the furious grandmother to be a frog for the rest of her life.

There are two elderly figures in this folktale: the grandmother and the eldest grandson. In Indonesian context, the elderly is highly respected in society and is often regarded as a leader and authority figure in the family, clan, and society. The elderlies in this folktale definitely are respected and feared by their subordinate. The subordinate did what they asked. The elderlies, however, seem to assume superiority beyond control. They even exercise autocratic power. The grandmother cursed her subordinate for trivial mistake made, and accepted no apologies. She refused to listen to her granddaughter's explanation. As a result she lost her granddaughter, and having the other grandsons fleeing, she could loose the entire next generation. The eldest grandson is problematic too. While the grandmother is autocratic, inconsiderate, and unforgiving; the eldest grandson is irresponsible and coward as he chose to flee the scene to save himself.

It is obvious that this folktale features worrying portrayals of the elderlies, as modeled by the grandmother and the eldest grandson. This folktale depicts the elderlies who are autocratic, undemocratic, arrogant, unforgiving, irresponsible, and coward. It is disturbing to witness the Indonesian children have been growing up with these unrespectable role models as depicted in the folktale discussed. The depiction of such an authority figure is not healthy for children, and is not an ideal situation for the construction of future leaders. Folktale reconstruction is thus necessary to provide more positive role model for leaders and elders.

## 3. Method

What is a folktale reconstruction? The word reconstruction is rooted from the English word 'to reconstruct', which according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary means 'to establish', 'to form', 'to assemble again' or to 'reassemble'. When applied to folktales, folktale reconstruction means to rewrite and rebuild the tale based on an existing story, with the aim of correcting a mistake and fixing the non-constructive parts so that it becomes more constructive. (Citraningtyas, 2012).

Maurianne Adams (2000) in her framework 'Cycle of Socialization' states that each of us receives systematic instruction about how we should behave since childhood. The instructions are unchanged and are continuously repeated and emphasized throughout our lives, rotating in such a way that we will also pass it on to our next generation. This is what, according to Adams, led to the perpetuation of social problems as the social instruction continues to rotate.

Folktale, like the systematic instruction in Adam's Cycle of Socialization, is also systematically taught since childhood, and is constantly emphasized and strengthened. If this Cycle of Socialization is followed mindlessly, there will be no transformation in society. To create transformation in society, there is a need to break this cycle, to negotiate certain values.

Such cycle can be broken by folktale reconstruction because folktales are "... not a static phenomenon, but the product of an individual tradition bearer's constant reworking of it as he lives in the social group." (Adams, 1973: 37). Bradkūnas (1975) also states that folktales are not dead and stagnant "Tales, just as plants, adapt to a certain environment through natural selection and thus differ somewhat from other members of the same species". As society changes, folktales must also change to adapt. Thus, folktales must go through reconstruction process to be able to maintain relevance to the everchanging society.

The reconstructed folktale is expected to educate the younger Indonesian generation to move away from the curse, revenge, or condemning teachings, authoritarian figure, and move toward more positive outlook in life. As those children grow and live in society, the new values will be absorbed and transmitted in society and replace the old inappropriate values.

The reconstruction version of The Origin of Asmat Frog is thus offered. During the reconstruction process a number of focus group discussions (FGDs) are carried out, involving the local readers; anthropologist, professors in literary studies, educators, and parents. The basic spirit of this reconstruction is to maintain the desired values in the folktales, and to reconstruct those that are considered worrying and unconstructive.

During the FGD, the groups are discussing the values that they see as positive and need to be preserved in the folktale. The following are the values deemed necessary by the group: respect of elders, responsible, sibling support. On the other hand, the values deemed unnecessary by the group are: autocratic, unnecessary curses, irresponsible, and unforgiving.

Apart from considering the result of the FGD, it is also important to consider the Indonesian state philosophy during the reconstruction process. The state philosophy of Indonesia is "Pancasila". The name derives from the Sanskrit words: panca (meaning five) and sila (mening principles), reflecting the five interrelated principles on which the state's philosophy is based. As a state philosophy, Pancasila's metaethic should play an important role in guiding Indonesia's way of life, including in constructing an ideal elder-leader figure. The ideal figure of an elder-leader based on the Pancasila should possess the following traits:

1. Piety, God-fearing, considerate, freedom of worship.
2. Tolerant, humane, respect of other's rights and responsibility.
3. Patriotic, nationalistic, unity in diversity,
4. Open to discussion, listen to people
5. Cooperate, promoting peace.

These traits share similar, if not the same, qualities of good and ideal elder-leader accepted by many other nations and the world. None of the traits above are in opposition to any universal positive qualities in leaders. It is however unfortunate that many of the above qualities are missing in the characters of grandmother and the eldest son. It is disturbing that being the eldest figure that people and family look up to, the grandmother and the eldest son do not fulfill the ideal elder-leader figure according to Indonesia's state philosophy. They also disappoint the locals and experts who are involved in the focus group discussion.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The presence of Indonesian folktales and its promotion as educational teaching materials for children has successfully made the folktales win the heart of Indonesian parents and educators. Folktales become a highly trusted genre for children in Indonesia. This issue is reflected from a recent survey on 199 respondents throughout Indonesia (Citraningtyas, 2017). 89% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed that Indonesian folktales must be preserved as they are stories handed down from ancestors and therefore must be useful for the education of children. It is interesting to note, however, that 39% of respondents acknowledged that Indonesian folktales contain negative teachings. This figure becomes an optimistic hope that folktale reconstruction is important and necessary.

The reconstruction version that was offered, had reconstructed the most crucial part of the story, that is the ending. In the reconstruction version, the grandmother was surprised because she did not think that she was able to curse. She admitted that she was not serious when she cursed her granddaughter. She regretted what she did because after she had lost her pet fish, she lost her granddaughter too. When she got home, her six grandsons – lead by the eldest grandson - who had just heard about the fate of their little sister, confessed their wrongdoings. They apologized and promised to do anything to free their little sister from being a frog. The grandmother got even more upset. That night the grandmother had a dream that she met her pet fish. The pet fish told her that the granddaughter was innocent, that should not have been cursed to be a frog. The fish was willing to be the frog to replace the granddaughter provided that the grandmother and the grandsons managed to collect every single fishbone that the grandsons already threw away. So the grandmother told the eldest grandson, and all the grandsons work hard together to collect the fishbones. It was not easy to collect all of the fishbones, and by the agreed time, they still had one missing fishbone. The eldest grandson brought the incomplete fishbones to the grandmother, and continued to look for the missing one. At last the eldest grandson found the last missing fishbone, and the granddaughter came back alive as grandma's pet fish replaced her to be the frog. They all lived happily. They were happy that the granddaughter was alive again, and grandmother's pet fish returned in the form of a frog.

This new version of the folktale offers a different role-model for children. It teaches young generation that an authority figure is not always perfect and can make mistake. But most importantly, the authority figure is willing to apologize for the mistake. It is an important lesson for Indonesian both young and old, especially because they grew with the assumption that an authority figure cannot make mistake.

Many authority figure are assumed, or assume themselves as having power parallel to deity power. The grandmother and the eldest grandson in this reconstruction version are, however, different. They are still the elderly figure who are capable of making mistake, but are willing to toil to correct their mistake. She is an elderly who regrets her mistake for cursing her innocent granddaughter, which is not an easy matter for somebody in her position. The grandsons, especially the eldest as the representation of the leader, are made responsible for his crime too, rather than getting away and let the little sister take all the punishment. It thus offers a more unselfish, forgiving, sympathetic and responsible role model of elderly figure. These are beneficial values to be passed on to children.

The pet fish that became the frog is also highly relevant for the local culture as depicted in the artworks of Asmat people that often depict fish and frog together in figure 1 below.



**Fig. 1. An asmat tray, featuring a fish and a frog**

This reconstruction version of this folktale also features an authority figure who listens to her inferior. The grandmother listens to her pet fish through her dream. The willingness of the grandmother to listen to those supposed to be her subordinate is a positive value that is beneficial to be passed on to children. However, it is a value that is not yet popular in Indonesia. The traditional stereotype of an elderly in the eastern culture, including Indonesia, is that they are expected to be more powerful and be listened to. This power relation is accepted both by the old and the young. This kind of power relation, however, does not educate the elderly to be give opportunity to the young, nor does it empower the young to take initiative.



**Fig. 2. The grandmother listens to her pet fish through a dream.**

According to Hofstede (2005), Indonesia is a country with a high score of power distance index, i.e. 78. It means that Indonesians are highly dependent on hierarchy in society as well as in the family. There are unequal rights between power holders and non power holders; the elders are expected to be directive and holds strong controls. Power is centralized to power holders, such as the elders.

If power distance index remains unchanged for generations, Sweetman (2012) worries it will be difficult for the powerless group to make any innovation under these conditions. This reconstruction version of the tale helps to make a change to this strong hold of social hierarchy so that innovation amongst the nation's young generation can be boosted. A clearly useful tool to empower the future generation.

## 5. Conclusion

It is an unwitting fact that not all folktales are appropriate educative tools despite its strong use in educating children. Folktales can function as a double-edged blade. While they transmit values to nurture desired teachings, they simultaneously can portray inappropriate emotions, improper attitudes, adverse notions, stereotypical images, even unhealthy power relations. Stemming from the case of the folktale discussed, there is a need to reconstruct certain Indonesian folktales to educate the elders and empower the young. The positive teachings embedded in the reconstruction version of The Origin of Asmat Frog does develop positive desirable behaviour, attitudes and values for the bettermen of future generation.

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