

Indonesian Folktales in The Past, Present and Future

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**Indonesian Folktales in The Past, Present, and Future:
Are We Reluctant to Change?**

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ABSTRACT

Folktales are one of the oldest forms of literature for children. They started as oral tradition, and have been handed down to today's generation through written and then digital tradition. Folktales are not just stories that entertain children. They are stories that contain the strongest edutainment elements. Nations use folktales to hand down important values and teachings to the country's next generation. Being a genre that carries such an important agenda, folktales must also grow, change, and adapt to society and to changes. Folktales must always be renewed to face the challenges of the ever changing society.

Indonesian folktales, a genre that survives the longest period of time, go through little changes. There is generally little change between Indonesian folktales at the beginning of 20th C, and its modern version in the 21st C. While other folktales from different parts of the world have gone through several changes, why are we stagnant with our folktales? Are we reluctant to change? Why are we reluctant to change? This paper explores the Indonesian folktales in the past, present, and future in comparison to other folktales worldwide, and promotes constructive changes to old folktales that need to be refurbished for new generation.

Keyword: folktales, children literature, reconstruction, edutainment

Introduction

It is generally known that stories for children are widely used ²not only to entertain children, but most importantly to educate them (Citraningtyas, 2011). In many parts of the world, including in Indonesia, children's stories are used to teach children from new vocabulary to counting to life lessons. It is highly unlikely that children's stories are used solely for entertainment purposes. In the early years, children do not usually pick their own books or stories. Parents and educators usually provide those stories for them. In choosing stories for children, parents' decision will usually be based on how educative the story will be for the children. Then, if at all, the entertainment element is put into consideration. There is a persistent educational element placed in children stories.

It is true that children literature ¹is functionally pedagogical. Children become skillful in many aspects of pedagogy from reading literature: they enhance vocabulary size, learn different skills ¹and information, gain values, enrich lives, improve creativity, and much more. Due ¹to these rich uses of children's literature, parents and educators are willing to encourage children to read children's literature.

Among the various genres of children's literature, folktales typically win the hearts of educators and parents as their common preference. Folktales are, in principle, one kind of children's literature that educates children the strongest. They have been purposefully written for children and aimed at educating them (Zipes, 2002) from the Enlightenment Age. Folktales are trusted vehicles to easily transmit values down the generations. They're more than just childhood tales. Robbins (1998), for example, compares folktales with standard children's stories, and argues that folktales go deeper by penetrating into the child's subconscious. Folktales thus appear to be voicing our wishes because we have accepted their values since childhood. Thus their legitimacy may remain to be undisputed (p. 101).

Citraningtyas (2011) conducted a minor survey in the class of Children's Literature at the Universitas Pelita Harapan Indonesia to examine what childhood tales students have in their thoughts. The survey reveals that students remember folktales more than any other children stories. Thirty student-respondents were given the opportunity to quickly indicate two children's stories they remember. A large majority of the stories noted by the students were folk tales. This is despite the fact that during the Children's Literature course, they were introduced to different genres of children's literature. However, 83% of the stories these students recalled are still folk tales. This outcome validates the findings of other scholars that folktales remain longer in people's minds and hence have a greater impact than any other forms of children's literature.

Folktales are also claimed to be effective of forming children's character (Johnston, 2001; Pantaleo, 2001; Meek 2001, Rusciano, 2003; Citraningtyas et al., 2011, 2012) and of moulding a nation (Johnston, 2000). The framework of folktales is stable, and this stability has made folktales a handy medium to easily transfer values to children down the generations (Citraningtyas, et. al. 2013). Due to the outstanding roles that folktales perform, it is only predictable that folktales can easily attract educators and parents. They will unsurprisingly choose folktales for their children's reading collection, as folktales are believed to be attained from ancient tradition, and thus assumed to contain no mistakes.

Folktales Must Change, Grow, and Adapt

Not many people realize that folktales need to change with time. Folktales are the kind of stories that grow with time. Just as plants, they grow to adapt with condition and situation. Society does change too. As folktales are product of society, they must also change, adapt, and grow with society.

Bradkūnas had made a firm statement regarding tale reconstruction: "*Tales, just as plants, adapt to a certain environment through natural selection and thus differ somewhat from other members of the same species*" (1975). Thus, it is important that tale reconstruction must be practiced in response to the ever-changing cultural and social shifts, as folktales are alive and growing, just like plants. When folktales do not adapt with changes in culture, the old practices that are rooted in folktales may not be able to

solve the problems of life in today's world. The teachings may not be suitable for modern audience, or even the folktale might transmit values that are no longer acceptable in society. In order to be able to address problems of today's world, folktales need to be rewritten to adapt to society's needs.

This rewriting and reshaping of folktales to make it more suitable to the ever-changing society is what Citraningtyas (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) refer to as **folktale reconstruction**. What is a **tale reconstruction**? **Tale reconstruction** is derived from the word "to reconstruct", that is generally understood as to correct a defect or broken part. Something is being reconstructed because it needs to be corrected. For example, a building is being rebuilt to refurbish its appearance and/or reinforce its structure. Physical reconstruction is required to correct a defect in the body. Reconstruction, when applied to a tale, is intended to recreate the current story in order to make it better and more appropriate for adaptation to cultural and social changes. The parts that are no longer suitable are replaced with fresh, healthier, and stronger ones. (Citraningtyas et.al., 2012, 2013, 2014).

Folktales Around the World: Past, Present, Future

Tale reconstruction is not a new practice, and a number of well-known stories have been reconstructed throughout history. The well-known story of Cinderella will be a prominent example of this. Over the ages, Cinderella has undergone a variety of changes to respond to cultural changes. As has been widely known, Charles Perrault wrote the earlier version of *Cinderella* in 1697, entitled *Cendrillon*.

In the Brothers Grimm's version, published in 1812, the stepsisters were not ugly. They are "beautiful and fair of face, but vile and black of heart" – so, they are beautiful looking, but bad personalities. In the same version we also read how the stepsisters "were punished with blindness as long as they lived":

"When the wedding with the prince was to be held, the two false sisters came, wanting to gain favor with Cinderella and to share her good fortune. When the bridal couple walked into the church, the older sister walked on their right side and the younger on their left side, and the pigeons pecked out one eye from each of them. Afterwards, as they came out of the church, the older one was on the left side, and the younger one on the right side, and then the pigeons pecked out the other eye from each of them. And thus, for their wickedness and falsehood, they were punished with blindness as long as they lived." (Brothers Grimm, 1812. Translated by D.L. Ashliman, ©2001-2006)

As society shifts to a more accepting culture, we now learn that Cinderella has forgiven the stepmother and stepdaughter, and the story ends up living happily ever after: an end that is more positive and more appropriate to today's society. For some modern stories, Cinderella also allows her stepmother and her stepmothers to stay with her.

The Brothers Grimm version of Cinderella also involves cutting of toes and heels, with a lot of blood involved.

"The two sisters were happy to hear this, for they had pretty feet. With her mother standing by, the older one took the shoe into her bedroom to try it on. She could not get her big toe into it, for the shoe was too small for her. Then her mother gave her a knife and said, "Cut off your toe. When you are queen you will no longer have to go on foot."

The girl cut off her toe, forced her foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the prince. The other sister should try on the shoe. She went into her bedroom, and got her toes into the shoe all right, but her heel was too large. Then her mother gave her a knife, and said, "Cut a piece off your heel. When you are queen you will no longer have to go on foot." The girl cut a piece off her heel, forced her foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the prince (Brothers Grimm 1812, Translated by D.L. Ashliman, ©2001-2006).

As we know it, this Grimm and bloody scene is removed in the modern version of the tale. This removal is more in line with today's societal demand when we do not want any violence and sight of blood in our children's stories.

² The end of another well-known "Little Red Riding Hood" folk tale has also undergone a variety of changes. In his version of an unknown author, Little Red Riding Hood manages to escape from the wolf and is free. Then, in the story published by Charles Perrault in 1697, the folk tale ends with the little girl being eaten by the evil wolf.

"Grandmother dear, what big teeth you have!"

"The better to eat you with!"

With these words, the wicked Wolf leapt upon Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up. (Charles Perrault, 1697)

The story ends with the wolf emerged as the winner.

² However, in the recent editions that we know today, the sad end is provided with a relieving dimension. The recent editions tell how a hunter comes to the rescue, killing the wolf and saving the Little Red Riding Hood and the Grandmother:

When the wolf had stilled his hunger, he got back into bed, fell asleep and began to snore very very loud. A hunter was just passing, and he thought: "How the old woman is snoring! I'd better go and see what's wrong." So he stepped into the house and went over to the bed and saw the wolf was in it. "You old sinner!" she said, "I've found you at last. It's been a long time." He levelled his musket and was just about to fire when it occurred to him that the wolf may have swallowed the grandmother and that there might still be a chance of saving her. So instead of firing, he took a pair of scissors and started cutting the sleeping wolf's belly open. After two snips, he saw the little red cap, after another few snips the little girl jumped out, crying: "Oh, I've been so afraid! It was so dark inside the wolf" And

the old grandmother came out, and she too was alive, though she could hardly breathe. Little Red Cap ran outside and brought big stones, and they filled the wolf's belly with them. When he woke up, he wanted to run away, but the stones were so heavy that his legs wouldn't carry him and he fell dead.” (Brothers Grimm, 1857).

2 This happy ending version is now seen to be more suitable for younger audiences. Pedagogically, happy endings ease children's anxiety and give them courage to face life's challenges.

Another well-known tale that has gone through a number of adaptations is *The Little Mermaid*, a story of a young mermaid's sacrifice for love. The folktale was first published by Hans Christian Andersen in 1836, and the tale is far from the beautiful ending that we know today. Instead, Andersen's original Little Mermaid never gets to marry the Prince. The Prince is married to his royal bride, and it is the deal with the witch that Little Mermaid shall die / become the 'foam of the sea' on the wedding night of the Prince. Her sisters come to help Little Mermaid, by giving her a dagger to kill the Prince. Should the Little Mermaid be successful in killing the Prince and lets his warm blood falls upon her feet, the Little Mermaid will be able to return to her family and becomes a mermaid again. However, the Little Mermaid could not kill the Prince. So, she disappears and becomes daughters of the air for 300 years.

This sad ending of The Little Mermaid has been changed to a happy ending in the modern version of the tale. The Little Mermaid that we know today is Ariel who is successful in marrying the Prince, and the live happily ever after.

2 The changes in the above three widely known folktales are proof that tale reconstructions are common and imperative. Apart from the above versions of Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood, there are hundreds of other versions of the tales worldwide. In fact, in 1893 Marian Roalfe Cox compiled 345 versions of Cinderella, Catskin, and Cap O'Rushes worldwide. They are so diverse that one version and the other may be very different.

In China, for example, the Cinderella's version is entitled *Yeh-Sen*, and has a fish as the girl's godmother. In Africa, the story is set in African jungle. Not all of the versions involve footwear, and one of them is its Indonesian version *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. Pretty slippers, glass slippers, and a ball are obviously not Indonesian culture.

2 These are all evidence that folktales are suited to the needs of society. As culture evolves, folktales must also adjust in order to adapt.

Indonesian Folktales: Past, Present and Future

We have seen that folktales around the world have gone under positive changes to adapt to changes in society. How about Indonesian folktales? Are Indonesian folktales

changing? Do Indonesian folktales adapt to society's needs? We will observe a number of widely known Indonesian folktales, and their variations across time.

Indonesians are familiar with a tale about a young man who is cursed and punished to be a stone for failing to recognize his mother, titled *Malin Kundang*. So well-known is the tale that it is difficult to find any Indonesian today who has not heard or read the tale. To date, this old tale has often become a reference point for Indonesians to exercise disciplinary action from the authority to the subordinates (Citraningtyas, 2010). The tale has also become the corpus of many other Indonesian folk tales. There are at least twelve other folk tales that are similar to *Malin Kundang* found in different regions of Indonesia (Citraningtyas, 2004). This nationwide web of similar stories helps to guarantee the transformation of the values found in the tale to younger generation around Indonesia.

The *Malin Kundang* tale has a long history. The earliest mention of *Malin Kundang* is, according to Sabaruddin Ahmad (1979, pp. 27-33), in the form of 'kaba', which could be as early as 15th C. The old folktale has since been retold in many different discourses. Throughout the versions known, the *Malin Kundang* folktale maintains a common schema with consistent components. The most consistent component is in the ending of the story, where *Malin Kundang* is cursed to be a stone. This famous ending is still well maintained to the present day, and is mythologized by a man-made stone of *Malin* kneeling down amongst his ship's wreckage at Pantai Air Manis in Padang. This man-made statue strengthens the message that an unfilial child will ultimately be cursed to be a stone.

A tale like *Malin Kundang* and several other similar tales in Indonesia that ends with a child cursed to be dead, unproductive, and cold, like a stone, may not be appropriate for today's younger generation. This message may bind the young generation of Indonesia and inhibit them from being productive. The unforgiving behavior on the part of the parent is not healthy for the future of the young generation of Indonesia. This may reflect the unforgiving conduct of an authority to their subordinate. Moreover, the fault that the child commits seems to be a fixable mistake. The child is already sorry about what happened and begged for forgiveness. From this end, children can see that it is natural and valid for the authority to curse the subordinate. As a result, Indonesian will grow into an unforgiving nation that is easy to curse whoever is perceived as subordinate or even minority. This perception has to be changed.

Another widely known tale is a folktale entitled *Timun Mas* (the Golden Cucumber). It is a tale about a young girl born from a golden cucumber given by a giant to her parents, under the condition that the giant will take *Timun Mas* back when she is old enough. When the time comes, *Timun Mas* is given four magical weapons to kill the giant and she is successful in killing the giant. For many decades, *Timun Mas* tale is used to give lessons to children that a wicked person, like the giant, will ultimately be defeated (Samsuni, 2015). Others use this tale to educate Indonesian children about women's power or women's emancipation (Rozak, 2012). *Timun Mas* is seen as a brave heroine, set to be an example for Indonesian women. As it is seen as a tale about the bravery of

women, the tale has never been reconstructed. From year to year, the same tale is retold again and again without any changes.

Timun Mas tale, in fact, carries messages that are disturbing to be transformed to future people as the tale teaches children to break promises, to be deceitful, and to be unfair. If this kind folktale is not reconstructed, Indonesian children will grow with a wrong teaching on how to deal with promises. They will think that it is acceptable to be deceitful and break promises. The tale also carries a message that the way to solve problems is through cunning ways rather than smart ways. *Timun Mas* and her parents cunningly plan to kill the ogre who has helped them so that they can live happily ever after. Another disturbing implication from the tale is the thought that it is acceptable to kill others when one is powerless. These messages are negative and alarming when continuously passed on to younger generation.

Why Reluctant To Change?

There are still many more Indonesian folktales that contain unconstructive messages to be transformed to younger generations. Take example of folktales such as *Roro Jonggrang*, *Sangkuriang*, *Rawa Pening*, *Batu Menangis*, and many more that teach children to be tricky, unfair, take revenge, authoritarian and other negative teachings. However these tales are left unchanged to the present day. Why are we reluctant to change?

Citraningtyas et. al. (2014) reconstructed the *Malin Kundang* with a new title, *Nilam Kandung*. Unlike *Malin Kundang*, *Nilam* is forgiven, freed from his curse, and is given another chance after facing a tough consequence. He then lives happily ever after with his wife and mother, embracing a promising future together. This new reconstructed version is based on the result of two empirical researches that intend to compare the impact of the reconstructed version with the traditional version on the readers. The change in the ending to forgive the child and to give him another opportunity has encouraged a forgiving and positive attitude to readers.

Citraningtyas (2015) has also reconstructed *Timun Mas*. The new reconstructed version is titled *Timun Permata* (the Diamond Cucumber). This reconstructed version of the tale teaches children to keep promises no matter how difficult they might seem. At the same time, it acknowledges that promises are often hard to keep, and should a particular promise is difficult to keep, it is best not to break the promise cunningly. It is best to negotiate to reach mutual agreement. Negotiation as shown in *Timun Permata* is not a simple matter, and oftentimes it has to be done more than once to achieve the desired result. Both self-control and the willingness to understand others are the crucial in the negotiation process between *Timun Permata* and the ogre. This negotiation is accompanied by hard work. In the end, a mutual agreement is reached, and *Timun Permata* happily returns to her parents' house. *Timun Permata* is a better example of women's emancipation. She shines like a diamond, and is more priceless than gold. After all, she is *Timun Permata* (Diamond Cucumber) who is more precious than *Timun Mas* (Golden Cucumber).

Despite the above brave effort made to reconstruct disturbing folktales, there are still mixed reactions among Indonesians. Some believe that reconstruction is good and necessary for certain folktales. Many others still believe that folktales must not be changed nor altered in any way. These people treat folktales as if it were sacred documents that must be guarded carefully and must not be altered nor modified. They belong to the group that do not know that the folktales are alive, not dead nor stagnant. If we continue to hold on to this standpoint, we will not be able to advance as a nation. We will not be able to offer new teachings and new values that are more suitable for modern life. We will not be able to face the challenges of today.

Conclusion

For centuries, folktales are stories that are the most powerful to teach children. Being a story that is so powerful, folktales must be alive, grow, and adapt with society. Folktales that do not anymore conform to today's values and teachings, must be reconstructed. Many folktales around the world have been reconstructed to offer better teachings to younger generations. Indonesian folktales, however, have not been reconstructed. As a result many teachings embedded in Indonesian folktales are not suitable any more to be passed on to future generation. Indonesians must wake up and be critical to our own folktales, and ready to reconstruct those that are no longer suitable for today's society.

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