



RCMI 2016

## Reconstructing 'Batu Nong' and Gender Relations in Indonesia

Clara Evi Citraningtyas

*Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia*

### Abstract

This paper addresses the need to reconstruct folktales that are not anymore suitable for today's society. It has been widely known that folktales are one of the many important tools to educate children, to be acceptable members of society. However as societies and values grow, many folktales remain static. This causes disconnection in the education of young generation. In this paper, an Indonesian folktale titled 'Batu Nong' is discussed in relation to gender equality in Indonesia. It is a tale about a husband who is cursed to be a stone for doing a task that is supposed to be a woman's task. Although there are strong campaigns for gender equality in Indonesia, folktales that discourage gender equality are equally maintained. As a result, a recent World Economic Forum ranked Indonesia at 95 among 135 countries in terms of gender equality. This fact underlines the urgency of rewriting and reconstructing Indonesian folktales that cripples the advancement of gender equality. In this study, 199 Indonesians responded on the survey on their thought on the importance of folktale reconstruction.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific & Review committee of RCMI-2016.

*Keywords: Folktale Reconstruction, Gender, Education*

### Introduction

Folktales are one of the most important tools not only to entertain, but more importantly to educate children. They are, in fact, one of the world's oldest teaching tools that can be found in all societies (Spagnoli, 1995). Jack Zipes (2002) even states that folktales are deliberately written and geared to educate children. Folktales are also used to 'shape' nations (Johnston, 2000; Citraningtyas, 2010). A nation's values are, in large parts, handed down through folktales that have been passed down through generations by word of mouth then through printed materials, and more recently, digital.

The teachings embedded in folktales are mainly lessons to fulfill requirements to be acceptable members of society. This includes the issue on how to behave in accordance to gender rules. Through folktales, children are endlessly taught on how to be proper girls and boys in society. Indonesian folktales, too, have been used as a pervasive tool throughout generations in sustaining this cultural heritage.

The Indonesian nation is, in fact, rich in folktales. Unfortunately, as Citraningtyas (2004, 2012, 2013, 2015) found, the nation owns many destructive and unconstructive folktales. This is disturbing especially when the tales are aimed at forming a national identity for future generation. Such folktales that end with unconstructive endings like curses, insults, harshness, calamitous punishment, and other negative characteristics, for example, may hinder Indonesians from developing, and for searching for more positive alternatives. Other folktales that promote gender oppression will cripple the struggle for gender equality in the country.

If folktales are believed to form a national identity, a serious question should then be posed. Are folktales that support unconstructive and unproductive society still relevant to today's readers? Should these folktales continue to be transmitted to young generation as it is? Should there not be any adjustment made to make these folktales to be more relevant to today's readers? As one of the most important tools, folktales are supposed to grow and adapt with the growth of societies. Folktales must not interfere the positive growth of society in the name of cultural heritage. Members of societies, however, are often reluctant to grow. Some members of societies often treat folktales as an obsolete text that must not be changed at all. Many even treat folktales like holy texts, and thus resist to make any changes to folktales. This is ironic as believing that folktales are non changeable parallels to the belief that society need to grow.

\*All correspondence related to this article should be directed to Clara Evi Citraningtyas, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia  
Email: [clara.citraningtyas@uph.edu](mailto:clara.citraningtyas@uph.edu)

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The former Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia, Anies Baswedan, had recently called for a change to Indonesian folktales: "our folktales must also grow and evolve with times." (Republika, 2015). This is an important calling that must be responded with great enthusiasm. Such folktales must be rewritten and reconstructed for the betterment of human capital. The changes made should be more in line with the demands of positive modern values.

This paper reveals what Indonesian respondents say about their own folktale. Their opinion is used to discuss an Indonesian folktale titled 'Batu Nong' in relation to gender relation in Indonesia.

### Folktale Reconstruction

What is tale a folktale reconstruction? The English word reconstruction is taken from the word to reconstruct. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary it means to establish, to form, to assemble again, or to reassemble. Applying the dictionary meaning of the word to folktales, it can be concluded that folktale reconstruction is to rebuild existing tales with the aim to correct errors and fix parts that are not constructive, or change values that are not anymore suitable to today's readers.

In many parts of the world, folktale reconstruction is not a new entity and has been done throughout history to a number of well-known tales. The famous example of this would be the well-known tale of Cinderella. Cinderella has gone through a number of changes throughout centuries to adapt with societal changes. As we know it, Cinderella was first written by Charles Perrault in 1697 entitled Cendrillon.

In the Brothers Grimm's version, published in 1812, we read how the stepsisters 'were punished with blindness as long as they lived'. As society changes to a more forgiving society, we now know that Cinderella has forgiven the stepmother and stepdaughters and the tale ends in living happily ever after: an ending that is more constructive and more acceptable to today's society. In the recent movie version by The Walt Disney, Cinderella clearly says "I forgive you" to her stepmother. In some modern versions, Cinderella even invites her stepmother and stepsisters to live with her.

The ending of another well known folktale Little Red Riding Hood has also gone through a number of changes. In its version by an unknown author, Little Red Riding Hood manages to escape from the wolf, and is safe. Then in the version written by Charles Perrault in 1697, the folktale ends with Little Red Riding Hood gets eaten by the bad wolf. However in the modern versions that we know today, that sad ending is added with a relieving element. The modern versions feature a hunter or a huntsman who are hunting wolf-skin. The hunter kills the wolf and saves the Little Red Riding Hood and the Grandmother. This happy ending version is deemed to be more appropriate for younger audience today. Happy endings pedagogically relieves children's tension and give them hope in facing challenges in life.

The changes in the above well-known folktales are proof that tale reconstructions are normal and necessary. These are all evidence that folktales adapt to society's need. As society changes, folktales must also change to adapt.

### The Need To Reconstruct Indonesian Folktales

There has been a mixture of opinion among Indonesians on whether or not some Indonesian folktales need reconstruction. In order to seek the current opinion of Indonesian readers on the subject, the writer distributed a survey publically. There were 199 respondents responded in the survey, consisting of 110 female and 89 male. The respondents age range from 11 – 70 years old. There are essentially three important questions posed to them: their opinion on the positive and negative elements in Indonesian folktales, and whether they think Indonesian folktales that contain negative teachings must be reconstructed. Then they are asked to mention one Indonesian folktale that they know, and list the positive and negative teachings in the tale. The results are as follows:

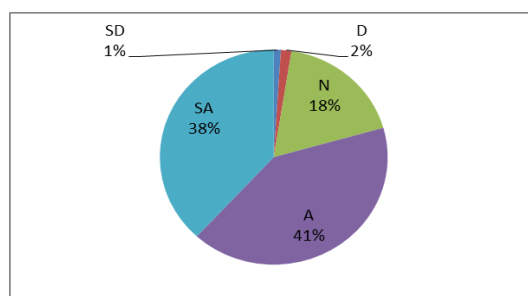


Figure 1. Positive Teachings Embedded in Indonesian Folktales

In answering the question whether or not Indonesian folktales contain positive elements, the majority of Indonesian respondents agree (41%) and strongly agree (38%) that Indonesian folktales contain positive teachings. Only 1% of respondents strongly disagree, and 2% disagree that there are positive teachings. It reflects respondents' trust on positive teachings embedded in Indonesian folktales.

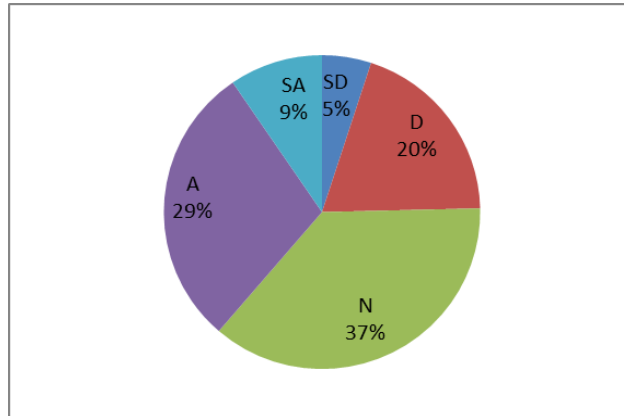


Figure 2: Negative Teachings Embedded in Indonesian Folktales

On the question whether or not Indonesian folktales contain negative teachings, the majority of Indonesian respondents are neutral (37%) about it. It shows how the majority of respondents prefer to be on the safe ground in expressing an opinion on the presence of negative teachings in Indonesian folktales. With a strong campaign that Indonesian folktales contain precious values as Indonesia's cultural heritage, it is not easy to be self-reflective and acknowledge the negative elements. By being neutral rather than disagree, however, these respondents already notice the possibility of negative elements in Indonesian folktales. Although the highest percentage of respondents are neutral on this issue, if the percentage of those who strongly agree (9%) and agree (29%) is added, the sum is 38% - still higher than those who are neutral. This proves how Indonesian respondents are already self-critical to acknowledge that there are negative elements too embedded in Indonesian folktales among the positive elements.

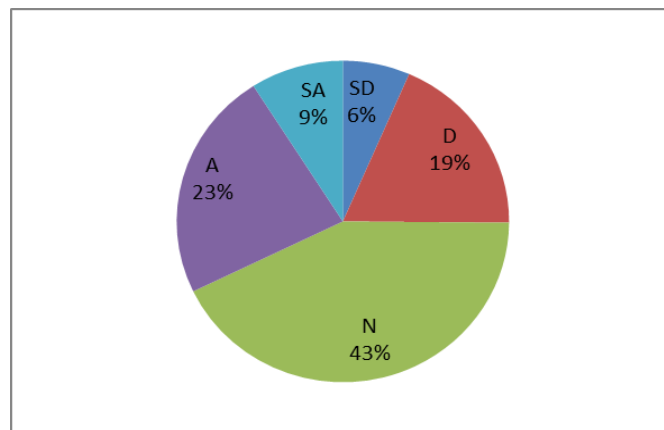


Figure 3: The need to reconstruct Indonesian folktales that have negative teachings

When the respondents are posed with the question regarding the need to reconstruct the folktales, the majority of respondents still favor the safest option, that is to be neutral (43%). This neutral position, however, can be read positively. It can mean that Indonesian respondents are already open to the possibility of folktale reconstruction. If compared between the percentage of respondents who agree/strongly agree and who disagree/strongly disagree to the reconstruction of Indonesian folktales that contain negative teachings, those who agree/strongly agree (32%) is significantly higher than those who disagree/strongly disagree (25%). This is a strong indication that Indonesians are prepared for folktale reconstruction. Indonesians are ready to respond positively to its former Minister of Education Anies Baswedan's call to make Indonesian folktales evolve with time.

When the respondents are asked to mention one Indonesian that need reconstruction, 'Batu Nong' is among the list. This folktale is then chosen to be discussed in this study because of two reasons: it is a tale that

contain values that urgently needs reconstruction, and it is a tale from a region of Indonesia that is rarely studied. 'Batu Nong' is a tale that promotes gender inequality in the middle of the country's struggle to achieve gender equality. If this kind of folktale is kept static, Indonesia's rank in terms of gender equality will not get better than today's rank (World Economic Forum ranked Indonesia at 95 among 135 countries in terms of gender equality).

### 'Batu Nong', A Folktale To Educate

'Batu Nong' is an Indonesian folktale from Sumbawa, a small island to the east of Bali. It is a tale about a husband and a wife who is said to live happily with their young child. The tale opens with a statement that in the village where they live, men and women have the same role. That gender equality is good in that village. Except for one thing. For one thing only: that it is prohibited for men to clean up their children's bottom. Men must not clean up their children's diapers are because it is the duty of women.

One day, the wife wanted to go and watch a folk festival in a nearby village. It is said that the husband gave permission to his wife to go because he loved her so much. He was, however, a little worried if their child might urinate or pass the bowel during her absence. The wife said that she will not be long and that the husband could wait for her to clean their child. So off the wife went. She took a little longer than planned. The child did urinate and pass the bowel. The smell was awful. The husband tried to wait for his wife, but at last he could not stand the smell any longer. He decided to clean his child. He had not finished doing so, that he felt his whole body changed to be a dragon with a human head.

His wife came home surprised to find her husband became a dragon with a human head. The husband told his wife that he regretted letting his wife go and watched the folk festival. He gave permission because he loved her so much, but he should not have done so. The husband then asked for a large clay pot for him to hide himself in. The wife regretted leaving her husband to go and watched the festival, but it was now too late. She did what her husband asked. She also provided food for him everyday as was the order of her husband.

One day the village was caught in war and people had to evacuate. As the wife evacuated, the pot followed the wife's boat. The villagers eventually found out about the dragon with a human head. So the dragon in the pot, who is actually the husband, ran uphill and became a stone on top of the hill. The stone, eventhough it looks like that it would fall anytime, it still stood erect up to this day in the Lekong village, Alas District, Sumbawa.

This 'Batu Nong' tale has many disturbing elements if this tale continues to be distributed to young generation as it is. Eventhough the tale claims to support gender equality among the villagers in the society, but the essence of the folktale sends messages in absolute opposition to gender equality. That men are not allowed to clean diapers because it is women's task is a strong message that dirty and disgusting jobs must be done only by women. In the midst of strong campaigns about gender equality, this tale makes sure that gender equality is not entirely absolute. There must be job divisions to be kept, and the job division given to women are the lowest, dirtiest, and most disgusting kind of job: cleaning up diapers. The fact that there is one job left to be done only for women, makes sure that women are not entirely free. Women are still bound by one gender role, that is cleaning diapers. And that the one and only job bound to women is the lowly and disgusting job. This sends a message that eventhough the society acknowledges gender equality, low and disgusting jobs must still be left for women.

This present 'Batu Nong' folktale also sends strong warnings to Indonesian men. No matter how much they love their wives, Indonesian husbands must not let their wives entirely free from the duty to do lowly and disgusting jobs. Should there be a husband who tries to take over that lowly and disgusting job, the penalty is severe. He is cursed to be a dragon with a human head. This transformation to be a dragon that walks on earth low in the ground parallels with the low position of the task that he tries to take over. He becomes a low and disgusting creature that all mankind either avoids or tries to kill. Being a dragon with a human head adds to the absurdity and the scariness of this creature.

As though it is not enough for the dragon creature to be low and scary, this creature is also outcasted by society. It is therefore necessary for the dragon to remove itself from society. He becomes a stone. A hard, cold and dead object. And only then that society lets him alone. He is non living, he is dead, and he is entirely useless. He stands dead atop a hill, where all people inland or out in the sea can see. At this top position, seen from all direction, he serves as the reminder of all men not to do the same mistake again. The fact that the stone looks like that it is going to fall but it never does, serves as a strong reminder how people might think that this work division between gender is ready to collapse, but it is really not. It still stands strong on the hill. The folktale helps to confirm it strong position.

These disturbing messages in 'Batu Nong' must not be kept as it is. It is urgent to reconstruct the folktale and to change elements that hinder gender equality to become elements that promote gender advancement. In doing so the folktale will, once again, become a positive edutainment tool for Indonesia's young generation.

## Conclusion

Folktales are never neutral stories for children. They serve as tools to not only entertain, but also educate. They are used as edutainment tools worldwide, including Indonesia, to teach the young generation to expected behaviour. As teaching tools, however, many Indonesian folktales are disturbing as many still contain disturbing elements to pass on to young generation. These kinds of folktales need to be reconstructed to function fully as edutainment tools for children.

Although the survey in this study proves that Indonesians show some readiness to accept folktale reconstruction, a folktale like 'Batu Nong' does not teach behaviour that is acceptable in Indonesian society today. 'Batu Nong' thus needs to be reconstructed to function in Indonesian society that promotes gender equality.

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