

# Red Onion White Onion

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## **“Red Onion White Onion”: Reconstructing an Indonesian Folktale, Rewriting Childhood**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Folktales are very important because they are believed to educate society, especially its young generation. Although aimed for children, folktales are not written for the sole purpose of entertainment. Folktales are written to educate. They are used to shape and educate children, and to hand down important values. In doing so, folktales also shape nations and thus play a highly important role in a society.

It is unfortunate, however, despite society's ever changing culture and norms, many folktales still remain unchanged and stagnant. The old-aged teachings planted into the stories based on previous centuries are preserved as valuable 'tradition'. As a result, the old tales may miss their target in educating children especially in the modern world.

This paper discusses a well-known Indonesian folktale titled “Red Onion White Onion” (*Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*). While there are noble values in the folktale, some parts of the tale contain some worrying elements. This paper evaluates the messages embedded in the folktale, and proposes to reconstruct its worrying that are not representing accepted values today. By doing so, the popular folktale is reconstructed, and childhood is rewritten for a better future.

**Key Words:** Folktale, folktale reconstruction, *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, *Red Onion white Onion*.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As early as 19 BC, a Roman poet Horace was successful in promoting that literature is *Dulce et Utile* - “sweet and useful”. According to Horace, literature is supposed to entertain and to be useful for its readers. It is not always the case for children literature, however. Stories for children are generally less entertaining than useful. They are full of teaching elements that are embedded within the story. It is especially true with folktales. Folktales have the strongest teaching elements among other forms of stories for children. So unlike other stories for children, folktales are not solely aimed at entertaining children. They are used more to teach children with values that are deemed important for children.

Being convenient vehicles to pass on teachings from generation to generation, folktales become popular stories directed for children. Every culture has abundant of folktales to transmit desired teachings to their young generation. As a result, there are many different folktales in the world. All of these folktales worldwide, however, are variations on a limited number of themes. A classification system originally designed by Aarne (1910), then revised first by Thompson (1928) and later by Uther (2004), is intended to bring out the similarities between tales by grouping variants of the same tale under the same category.

Antti Aarne was the first to develop the indexing system for folktales, published as *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen*. The indexing system was based on identifying motifs, repeated

narrative ideas that made up European traditional narrative. Stith Thompson, an American folklorist, revised Aarne's classification system. Thompson also enlarged its scope to include folktales from outside Europe. In doing so, he translated Aarne's theory into English, and created the "AT number system" (Aarne-Thompson number system), a catalogue system to classify the tales. In 1961, Thompson further revised his catalogue system to include some 2500 basic plots from which, for countless generations, storytellers have built their tales. Hans-Jörg Uther, in *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, updated and expanded the AT-number system in 2004. He developed the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification (ATU) system and included more international folktales, removing examples whose attestation was limited to one ethnic group. This ATU classification is still widely used up to now.

The tale indexing system developed by Aarne - Thompson - Uther groups folktales into clusters that are each given a certain number. The names used for the grouping are typical, but usage can vary depending on the region and culture where the tale comes from. The tale type of the same group can also include closely related folktales. Tale types 400 - 459, for example, all feature supernatural or enchanted wife (husband) or other relatives (including brothers or sisters) as the primary protagonist; while tale types 500 - 559 all feature supernatural helpers. If variants are present within a certain tale type, subtypes are usually added. The famous Cinderella type, for example, has two subtypes i.e. 510 A and 510 B. The 510A is about the Persecuted Heroine: "The two stepdaughters. The stepdaughter at the grave of her own mother, who helps her (milks the cow, shakes the apple-tree, helps the old man; (cf. Type 480). Three fold visit to church (dance), and slipper test. The 510B is about Unnatural Love: "Present of the father who wants to marry his own daughter. The maiden as servant of the prince, who throws various objects at her. The three-fold visit to the church and the forgotten shoe. Marriage."

## THE RICH VARIANTS OF CINDERELLA AROUND THE WORLD

Cinderella is a folktale that is popular worldwide. It is a tale grouped as type 510 in the ATU index. As an old folktale, Cinderella is still popular to 21st Century readers and viewers. So popular is the tale that it has become strong reference for many women around the globe on what an ideal life for girls should be like. It is also famously used as a term to describe a condition of women's fear to be independent. The term "Cinderella Complex" was first used by Colette Dowling in her book *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence* (1981) to illustrate the unconscious desire of women to be taken care of by others, especially by men. This condition is just like Cinderella in the folktale, who is unable to free herself from her condition, and / or to live independently. Thus, Cinderella is dependent on someone else to take her out of her misery. That someone else is a man, a prince. This creates a wishful thinking among girls to wait for her 'prince', and also creates a belief that only a 'prince' could save girls. The Cinderella complex is based on the femininity celebrated in the tale, that a woman is beautiful, submissive, serving, dependent, and being envied by other females in society in trying to win the Prince.

Another reason for its popularity is the tale's common theme worldwide. Zipes (2001) noted that thousands of Cinderella's variants are known around the world. Folklorists generally agree to consider the story of Rhodopis (around 7 BC and 23 AD) about a slave girl from Greece who was taken as a wife by king of Egypt as the earliest known variant of the Cinderella type. Around 860, a version of the story appeared in China, titled Ye Xian (Beauchamp, 2010). Meanwhile, the oldest written version of the tale was found in Italy in 1634 with the title *Pentamerone*. It was then made famous by Charles Perrault in 1697 and the Brothers Grimm in 1812. Since then, thousands of different versions have been found.

Although many variants of Cinderella feature the wicked stepmother, the defining trait of type 510 is in fact a prosecutor who does not have to be the stepmother. Some rare versions even inverted the sex roles where the daughter is oppressed by the stepfather (Warner, 1995). In some versions, the biological father plays an active role in the humiliation of his daughter; in other versions the father is secondary to the new wife; and, still, in some other versions, the father has died.

The identifying item is not always a glass slipper. In fact, the glass slipper is distinctive of and made popular by Charles Perrault's version and its variants. Other materials are recorded in other versions. The earliest version recorded a pair of ancient leather sandals; the Chinese

version recorded beautiful petite embroidery shoes for bound feet; in the French version it is slippers made of velour. In other versions, it is not slippers or shoes at all. It can be an anklet, a bracelet, a ring, or some other object that identifies the right girl. Still in other versions, the identifying element can be the traits within, that the girl has.

## RED ONION, WHITE ONION (BAWANG MERAH BAWANG PUTIH), THE INDONESIAN VARIANT OF CINDERELLA

<sup>1</sup> The Cinderella variant in the Indonesian archipelago is titled “*Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*” (Indonesian for shallot and garlic). The tale is very popular in Indonesia, with many Indonesian provinces claim as the origin of the folktale. There are slight differences of the story in various versions around Indonesia, but the corpus of the story remains the same. It is a folktale about a hard-working, kind and humble girl, who lives with her greedy stepsister and stepmother.

There have been at least two different major versions listed by Wikipedia (“*Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, n.d.). The plot of the first version tells about a widow who lives with her two beautiful daughters, “*Bawang Merah*” (Red Onion or Red Shallot) and “*Bawang Putih*” (White Onion or White Garlic). Bawang Putih's birth father, who was also the husband of the widows, died a long time ago. Bawang Merah and Bawang Putih had opposing characters. Bawang Putih was attentive, caring, modest and honest. On the contrary, Bawang Merah was idle, stylish, arrogant and envious. Her mother spoiled Bawang Merah very much and that had aggravated her character. One day, as Bawang Putih was doing the laundry belonging to her stepmother and sister, she did not know it when a piece of her mother's cloth was washed away in the river. She was scared because she might be prosecuted and removed from home.

So Bawang Putih walked along the river looking for the cloth. Every time Bawang Putih saw someone by the water, she told them about the cloth, but nobody saw it. Eventually, she arrived to a point where the river had rushed into a cave. Surprisingly, in the cave, there was a very old lady. Bawang Putih asked her if she had seen a cloth being carried by the water. The lady had seen it, but she did not hand it to Bawang Putih right away. Instead, she made an agreement with Bawang Putih. The day grew into night and Bawang Putih bid farewell to the old lady. The old lady gave the cloth to her. Because of her kindness she also gave her a gift of two pumpkins, one was larger than the other. Bawang Putih was requested to pick the pumpkin she wanted. She was not greedy, therefore she chose the smaller one.

Returning home, the stepmother and Bawang Merah were very angry to Bawang Putih because she had been out the whole day. She informed them what had happened when her mother's cloth was washed away before she encountered the old lady in the cave. Her stepmother became even angrier because Bawang Putih chose the small pumpkin, so the mother threw the pumpkin to the ground. Beautiful gold jewelry and diamonds were found inside the broken pumpkin. The stepmother and Bawang Merah were very shocked. They can become really rich with a lot of jewelry. But they were greedy, so they screamed at Bawang Putih, wondering why she did not take the big pumpkin instead. The larger the pumpkin was in their eyes, the more jewelry and diamonds it was supposed to contain.

Fulfilling their greed, Bawang Merah followed the path taken by Bawang Putih. Bawang Merah purposely drifted her mother's cloth, walked along the shore, asked people, and finally came to the cave where the old lady lived. However, unlike Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah ignored the old lady's order to work, and also arrogantly told the old lady to hand her a larger pumpkin. And so the old lady handed Bawang Merah a larger pumpkin.

Bawang Merah happily brought the pumpkin that the old lady gave, imagining how much jewelry she would get. Returning home, the stepmother welcomed her beloved daughter. They hurriedly cut the pumpkin open. Instead of jewelry, out came a variety of terrifying poisonous snakes from the large pumpkin, attacking the stepmother and Bawang Merah.

In the second version, the father has two wives, each with a daughter of her own. The older one is Bawang Putih, and the younger one is Bawang Merah. Bawang Merah and her mother were jealous of Bawang Putih and her husband. After her father dies, Bawang Merah and her mother



take control of the household, and both Bawang Putih and her mother are bullied. Bawang Putih's mother stands up for her daughter, but she dies prematurely.

Without her biological mother and father, Bawang Putih is left to be humiliated by her cruel stepmother and half-sister. While Bawang Putih is suffering, she is cautious. One day, as she is out in the woods, she sees a talking fish in the pond. The fish tells her that she's really her dead mother. Bawang Putih is delighted to be able to connect with her late mother, and she quietly goes to the pond whenever she can.

Eventually Bawang Merah finds out. Bawang Merah lures the fish to the surface of the pond and catches it, cooks it and feeds it to Bawang Putih. When Bawang Putih finished eating, her stepmother and step-sister revealed the fish she had just eaten. Bawang Putih is so surprised and so sad. She collects the bones of the fish and buries them under a tree. When she visits the grave the next day, she is shocked to see that a beautiful swing has emerged from one of the branches of the tree. When Bawang Putih sits in the swing and sings an old lullaby, it effortlessly swings back and forth.

Bawang Putih continues to visit the magic swing whenever she can. One day, while she is on the magic swing a Prince who is hunting nearby hears her song. He follows the sound of her voice, but before he approaches her, Bawang Putih realizes that she is not alone, and quickly runs back home.

The prince and his soldiers discover the house of Bawang Putih. In some variants, this happened shortly after the Prince's first glimpse of Bawang Putih, but in other variants, it happens after a long hunt by the citizens of the Kingdom. Bawang Merah's mother, seeing the chance, ordered Bawang Putih to remain hidden. The Prince is wondering about the swing and the girl who sat in it. The mother of Bawang Merah says that the girl is her beautiful and talented daughter, Bawang Merah. While the prince admits that Bawang Merah is stunning, he asks her to show him how she sang in a magic swing.

Bawang Merah and her mother followed the prince reluctantly. Bawang Merah is sitting in the swing and trying to sing so that swing would move, but she failed. The prince, in anger, ordered the mother to speak the truth. Bawang Merah's mother is forced to admit that she's hiding another daughter. The Prince takes Bawang Putih to the swing, and as she had done countless times before, the magic swing starts to swing as soon as she starts to sing. The prince is delighted, requesting Bawang Putih to marry him. She agrees, and they live happily ever after that.

The story of Bawang Merah Bawang Putih has inspired the making of some modern version films and soap operas in Indonesia and even in Malaysia. Some well known films inspired by the folktale, as noted in the Wikipedia:

- In 1959, a Malaysian live-action musical was titled *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah*, starring Latifah Omar as Bawang Merah, Uthman Kalthom as Bawang Putih, and Mustapha Maarof as the Prince. This adaptation of the film is a twist in the characterizations where Bawang Putih is a bad step-sibling, while Bawang Merah is a good sister.

- In 1986, Malaysian television aired the remake of the *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* 1959 version.

- In 2001, a Malaysian film was titled *Putih*, starring the voices of Erra Fazira as Putih, Raja Azura as Merah.

- In 2004, an Indonesian soap opera (or sinetron) was titled *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* starring Revalina S. Temat as the good Bawang Putih and Nia Ramadhani as the bad Bawang Merah. The series was also very popular in Malaysia, which resulted it being aired again shortly after it ended months later.

- In 2006, an Indonesian film titled *Pohon Ajaib Berdaun Emas*, inspired by the Bawang Merah Bawang Putih tale, starring Pentty Nur Afiani, Chaterine Pamela, Afdhal Yusman, Sally Marcellina and Al-Indra.

- In 2006, and Indonesian film titled *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih: The Movie* was aired, starring Laudya Cynthia Bella, Eva Aninda, Nana Khairina and Ferry Irawan.

- In 2007, an Indonesian film title *Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih dan Dua Raksasa*, starring Naima, Vina Kimberly, Lestya, dan Lysewati.

## THE NEED TO RECONSTRUCT RED ONION WHITE ONION (BAWANG MERAH BAWANG PUTIH)

Being a highly popular folktale around Indonesia and its neighboring countries, *Red Onion White Onion* does carry positive values to be passed on to children. The folktale teaches that the good wins and the bad loses. This is an important teaching for children. Children need to be encouraged to do good deeds by giving examples of the rewards gained by those who are being good. In contrast, the bad and the wicked are punished and have to pay for their wickedness. *Red Onion and White Onion* also teaches that someone is worthy due to the person's internal quality. Bawang Putih does not need to own a glass shoe, or a bracelet, or an anklet to be identified as a good person. This is an important teaching for children. Children do not need worldly things for them to be good and to be of high quality. These positive teachings should be preserved.

Although the *Red Onion White Onion* contains positive teachings, there are unfortunately the not so positive teachings embedded in the tale too. Some of the negative values in *Red Onion White Onion* are as follows, mainly on gender portrayal.

a. Physical beauty reflects internal beauty.

Bawang Putih, who is pictured as more beautiful than Bawang Merah, is also kind hearted. On the other hand, Bawang Merah who is not as beautiful, has a wicked heart. The stereotype that beauty reflect goodness is not educational for children. With this kind of message repeated in this folktale, and echoed by so many other folktales, children will get the message that people who are physically beautiful, will have a beautiful heart as well. While people who are physically not beautiful, are wicked. This thinking is unhealthy and can even be dangerous for children.

b. Whiteness reflects goodness / colored (red) reflects badness.

Bawang Putih is white, and she is good. Bawang Merah is colored, and she is bad. This is another message that sends a wrong teaching to children. This message echoes so many other stories and folktales where whiteness is regarded superior and good. If this teaching is repeated, children will think that all white people are better than colored people. This is especially unhealthy for the Indonesian children. Having a history of being colonized by the Dutch for 350 years, they already grow up with the postcolonial syndrome that is still looming accross the archipelago. Many Indonesian children still believe that anything originates from the white culture will naturally be better than anything that originates from the non-white culture. This goes from language to fashion, to physical appearance, to beauty, to language, to intelligence and the list goes on.

c. Step mother is always wicked and does not love step daughter.

The continuous exposure and justification that stepmothers are wicked and do not love their stepdaughters are harmful rather than helpful. Stepmothers have long been unfairly generalized to be wicked. In real live, however, it is untrue that all stepmothers are always wicked. Children need to witness neutral portrayal of stepmothers.

d. Women are never in good relationship with other women.

Folktales and soap operas often present women who are always in direct opposition with other women, especially in trying to win men's attention, to attract men, or to try to find a boyfriend/ husband. This constant representation of women is highly unhealthy for children. Children, especially girls, will grow with the understanding that they must always compete with other women to win a man.

e. Unfortunate circumstances, that are suddenly changed to remarkable fortune.

These are some of the disturbing teachings that are embedded in *Red Onion White Onion*. These kinds of teachings cannot be ignored. Something must be done to stop this handing down of the not so positive teachings. A folktale reconstruction is necessary to better some tales.

What is and how does tale reconstruction work? The English word reconstruction is taken from the word to reconstruct. Reconstruction of folktales are rewriting of folktales by changing the parts of folktale that are deemed unsuitable for children. To reconstruct is generally understood as to build again. Something is reconstructed because there is a need to correct it. Citraningtyas proposed the following diagram for the reconstruction of folktales.

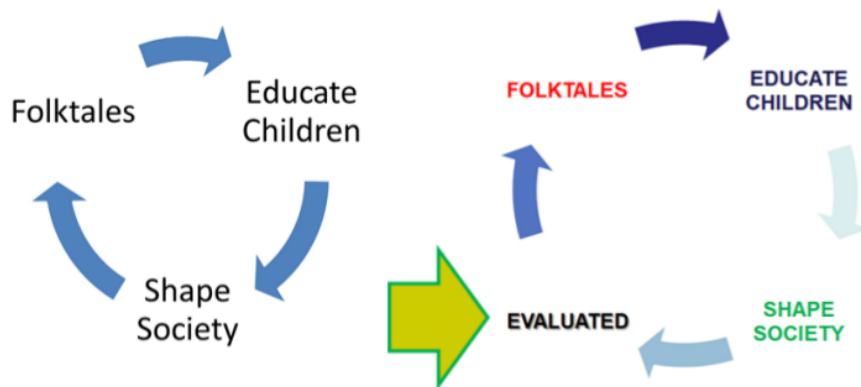


Diagram 1: Folktale Reconstruction

Based on the above diagram, to reconstruct a folktale is to rewrite the tale after an evaluation on its use. Tales are just like plants, according to Bradkūnas (1975). Tales “adapt to a certain environment through natural selection and thus differ somewhat from other members of the same species”. Tale reconstruction, therefore, has to be continually carried out so to adapt with the ever-changing cultural and social shifts.

Many folktales around the world have been reconstructed, including the many versions of Cinderella (Citraningtyas, 2012). It is a pity if *Red Onion White Onion* does not go through the same steps that the other versions of Cinderella go through. Thus, it is a necessity that *Red Onion and White Onion* is reconstructed. The reconstruction of *Red Onion White Onion* should be concentrated on diminishing the negative teachings embedded in the story. By doing so, the folktale will be an ideal means of edutainment for children.

## CONCLUSION

With the not so positive elements still embedded in *Red Onion White Onion* and other popular folktales in Indonesia and worldwide, it is important that the folktale is reconstructed. The reconstruction version of the tale must eliminate the negative teachings and pass on more positive teachings. By doing so to children, childhood is thus rewritten for the bettermen of future generation.

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