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Folktale Reconstruction and Human Resource Advancement,
a South East Asian Observation

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Abstract

Human resource is one of the most important advancements for a nation, for nations are made of people and built by its people. Therefore, it is urgent to begin right since childhood. A good plan for children's education will lead to a good road for human resources advancement. In many countries, folktales are used as one of the teaching tools to pass on desired values to children. Despite its importance as educational tools, not many educators in many nations are keen to regularly evaluate or to look into their folktales, to see if the values carried in their folktales are attuned with the present development. This paper discusses the importance of folktale reconstruction for the development of a nation's young people. It will deal with a number of curse folktales in Southeast Asia (mainly Indonesia and Malaysia) that do not carry positive educating values for today's development. The paper will demonstrate the effect of such tales to young people, and show how a reconstructed version of the tale will be advantageous for the betterment of future generation.

Keywords: Folktale, Education, Reconstruction, Human Resource

Introduction

It is widely known that stories for children are not just aimed at entertaining them but also, usually more importantly, at educating them (Stephens, 1998; Zipes, 2002; Citraningtyas, 2010, 2011; Citraningtyas et.al. 2013). Stories for children are written by adults, with the main purpose of educating children rather than of entertaining them. Therefore Horace's long-standing definition of literature as *'dulce et utile'*, is more correctly defined as *'utile et dulce'* (Citraningtyas et.al, 2013) in the context of children stories: to be useful first, and only then, to entertain.

Among different genres of children literature, folktales are the form of children literature that has the strongest educating element. They are purposely written to educate children (Zipes 2002). Folktales are also used to 'shape' nations through the values handed down from generation to generation (Johnston, 2000; Citraningtyas, 2010). Due to its stable and

repetitive structure, folktales become a suitable medium to hand down desired values throughout history.

With such important a role in educating children as well as in shaping nations, folktales are important tools for the human resource development of a nation. Noble values that are desired to be handed down, can be transported through these folktales. It is therefore unsurprising that educators and parents use folktales to promote and keep desired qualities to young generation, the future of a nation's human resource advancement.

However, as times goes by, as civilization advances, as globalization is looming, there is a need for human resource to also evolve. Human resource is one of the most important developments for a nation, for nations are made of people and built by its people. Therefore, it is urgent to start the development right since childhood. Values that used to be deemed necessary in the past, may not be necessary any more, and may even be inappropriate. It is therefore important to always evaluate if the messages and values embedded in the folktales are attuned with the present development. In this paper, the effect of a number of long-standing curse folktales in South East Asia (mainly Indonesia and Malaysia) will be discussed and examined. It will then show how a reconstructed version of a curse folktale can give positive impacts to young readers, the nation's future generation.

Curse Folktales of South East Asia

2.1. Indonesian Curse Folktales

Indonesia is known for a number of folktales that end in curses, where the protagonist is eternally cursed to be an object. One of the most popular curse folktales is *Malin Kundang*, a tale about an unfilial boy being cursed to be a stone by his mother for failing to acknowledge her upon his success in life. So popular is this tale that it serves as the model of many other similar tales. Citraningtyas (2004) listed that there are at least 12 other Indonesian folktales that end in similar way to *Malin Kundang*. All of these tales are tales about a disobedient child, being punished and cursed to be an object. Apart from the predominant punishment of metamorphosis into stone, the child can be transformed into other objects such as a dragon, an island, a bird, or a mountain. The tales are as follows:

No	Title	Origin	Subject and Outcome of Punishment
1	Amat Rhang Manyang	Aceh (West Indonesia)	Amat turns into a stone
2	Pulau Lancang Gadung	Jambi (West Indonesia)	Gadung turns into a dragon and the ship turns into a large stone.
3	Si Lancang	Riau	Si Lancang turns into a dragon, the ship's ropes turn into small snakes. The pile of his wives' clothes turns into a large stone (his wives are safe)
4	Si Linggi	West Kalimantan	Si Linggi and his crewmen died, and his ship turns into a stone.
5	Batu Banana	Central Kalimantan	The merchant, his ship, and his treasure (except his wife) turn into a stone.
6	Tokong si Culan	Riau	Culan, his wife, his children, and the food that his mother brought for him all turn into stones.
7	Dampu Awang	South Sumatra	Dampu Awang turns into an eagle, and his wife becomes a porcupine.
8	Nini Kudampai	South Kalimantan	Angui turns into a stone. The two stones combined together form a shape of Angui's mother hugging her son. The other stone is of Angui's wife.
9	Si Angui	South Kalimantan	Angui turns into a stone and his ship turns into three different mountains. The hat of Angui's mother also turns into a mountain.
10	Batu Nanges	Kalimantan	The girl turns into a crying stone
11	Asal Mula Pulau Si Kantan	North Sumatra	Si Kantan turns into an island.
12	Anak Durhaka	East Kalimantan	Jung turns into a stone

Another curse folktale that is popular in Indonesia is *Roro Jonggrang*. It is a tale of a beautiful girl named Roro Jonggrang who refused to be wed by a powerful, yet cruel king named Bandung Bondowoso. Roro Jonggrang did not have the courage to refuse Bandung Bondowoso's proposal, fearing that such blunt refusal would endanger her own family and people in her village. She therefore requested a demand to Bandung Bondowoso, if he wished to marry her. Roro Jonggrang demanded that Bandung Bondowoso built 1000

temples in one night. Bandung Bondowoso agreed and gathered together all of his troops of genies to help him fulfilled the demand. The venture almost completed approaching dawn. However, because Roro Jonggrang did not want to be the wife of Bandung Bondowoso, she quickly asked the women in the village to pound the rice with mortar and pestle to give a false impression that it was already morning. Bandung Bondowoso and his genie troops had built 999 temples, and only needed to build one more. But it was already morning and he had not finished the demand. Angrily, Bandung Bondowoso cursed Roro Jonggrang to be the 1000th temple to complete her own demand. So the legend goes that couples who date around the Prambanan temple will be cursed that they will split soon after.

Yet another popular Indonesian tale that involves cursing is the tale of *Tangkuban Perahu*. It is a tale of a beautiful lady named Dayang Sumbi who married an incarnated god in the form of a dog. They had a son named Sangkuriang. Sangkuriang was hit and casted away by Dayang Sumbi for unknowingly killing his father who was in the form of a dog. Dayang Sumbi was greatly saddened with the loss of her two beloved people. The gods granted her the gift of eternal youth. After years of living in exile, Sangkuriang became very successful and decided to return home. He met Dayang Sumbi, and they both failed to recognize each other. They fell in love with each other and planned to get married, only when Dayang Sumbi suddenly recognized Sangkuriang's birth mark. In order to prevent the wedding, Dayang Sumbi demanded Sangkuriang to build a large boat to cross the river, and a dam across Citarum river. Both tasks must be finished before sunrise. Sangkuriang meditated and asked the help of genies to complete the task. When Dayang Sumbi saw that the tasks were almost completed before sunrise, she panicked and ordered the villagers to spread red silk cloths in the sky to give impression that the sun had risen. Sangkuriang was fooled and got very angry knowing that he could not complete the task. He kicked the dam and the unfinished boat. The boat landed downside and formed what is now the Tangkuban Perahu mountain. The name Tangkuban Perahu can be literally translated as an upturned boat.

2.2. Malaysian Curse Folktale

A folktale that ends in a curse is also well known in Malaysia, Indonesia's closest neighbor. Langkawi, an island in the west coast of Malaysia, is famed for its Mashuri tale. The island is believed to be under the curse of Mashuri for seven generations. Behold, Mashuri was a beautiful lady of Siamese descent who lived in Langkawi at the end of 18th C. She married Wan Derus, the son of the Sultan representative in Langkawi. Her beauty attracted the envy and jealousy of people in the island, especially among the women.

During the reign of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah II ibni al-Mukarram Shah Ziyaüddin late Sultan (1803-1843), Kedah-Siam relations soured. Wan Derus was sent to fight the Siamese. Upon his departure, Mashuri was to live with her parents. At the time, a famous poet stopped in Langkawi and was well received by the community. He was allowed to stay at the home of Mashuri parents to teach poetry to people. Mashuri's parents in law accused her of committing adultery with the poet. So, they are sentenced to death. Before her death, she pronounced the famous curse that the island of Langkawi to be condemned with bad luck for seven generations. According to legend, she laid a white blood drain to prove her innocence.

Curse Folktales and Their Effects to Human Resource

Scholars believe that folktales have a greater impact on the psychological and moral development of young generation than other forms of literature. Ruth Bottingheimer (1986, p. 1) declares that folktales are one of the first literary forms with which people come into contact in their lives, and remain one of the deepest and most enduring childhood impressions for most. Adults who no longer read folktales, for example, will still recognize phrases such as "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the most beautiful of all?" from Snow White, and events such as the clock that struck 12 times as a sign for Cinderella to leave the ballroom. In Indonesia, people will easily identify expression such as 'cursed by the mother' or 'as cunning as a mousedeer'.

With the above curse folktales looming across Indonesia and some parts of Malaysia, we are going to observe the influence of the tales in the regions. Indonesians in general are familiar with the term 'dikutuk ibu' or cursed by the mother – a popular phrase from the *Malin Kundang* tale. So popular is the tale that the term 'being cursed' is used in a wide context to discipline Indonesians, and also to remind them that they could be the subject of parental curse for being disobedient. Curses rest on the belief in the possibility of bringing down calamity upon persons or things by the mere power of the spoken words Keith, 1971, p. 502; Eliade, 1987, p.182). The misfortune intended by curses can range from illness, harm, to even death. Curses can become effective immediately or may be hidden for years.

The psychological theory why curses work is that they are entirely psychosomatic: witchdoctor points bone, victims knows he or she is cursed with death and so obligingly gets on with it and dies within the week (Wrong, in Citraningtyas 2004). Thus, in order to be fulfilled, a curse must be uttered by someone who has power, and who knows that others know of his power. This relationship is comprehensible in the case of the tales discussed. In *Malin Kundang* and the other tales that end similarly with it, the person who pronounces curses is a parent who holds a powerful figure, and this power is known to children.

Indonesians, and many other Asian cultures, still believe that parents are powerful figures, and that a parent's curse is most effective in bringing about calamitous consequences to the children.

In *Roro Jonggrang*, the curse is pronounced by a powerful king that the people are afraid of. In *Tangkuban Perahu*, the curse is pronounced by a successful man who is angry because he is being fooled. In Mashuri tale, the curse is pronounced by the wife of the island's chief. She was even known as the Princess of Langkawi. Thus, the hierarchy of power is clear in these tales, and even emphasized when the person who is cursed expresses sorrow or fear, and thereby positions himself voluntarily within the 'curse channel'.

A key element in the way a curse functions within Indonesia's social frame is as what Massardi (in Citraningtyas, 2004) refers to as an 'anti-mirror' culture that Indonesians tend to have. According to Massardi, Indonesians are inclined to be non self-reflective about themselves, not to be self-critical, not to critically look at themselves as if they were in front of a mirror. It is apparent, for example, on how Indonesians often personify the people in authority – or more often the people in authority personify themselves, as if they were descendants of the gods, and hence they assume that they are inherently free of any wrongdoings, and therefore assume the right to curse. On the other hand, as a postcolonial nation, the people generally feel subordinate to the authority, and hence assume the right to be cursed. Therefore the 'curse channel' is complete.

In the twelve tales that ended similarly as *Malin Kundang*, the predominant punishment is metamorphosis into a stone. A stone is a cold, lifeless, valueless and an unproductive object. Being punished to be such an object, may in fact bind the Indonesian young generation and avert them from being productive. This unforgiving action from an authority figure to a subordinate is not advantageous for the future of Indonesian young generation. Moreover, this kind of ending may teach the children that that it is customary and rightful for an authority figure to curse their subordinate. As a result, Indonesian will grow to be an unforgiving nation that is easy to curse, and difficult to advance.

In *Pulau Lancang Gadung* and *Si Lancang* folktales, the disobedient children are cursed to be a dragon. Among world folktales, legends about dragons are among the most popular themes. Most nations record description of dragons in their folktales. In Western culture, dragons normally have evil connotations. In Chinese culture, however, the symbolic implications of the dragons generally have retained positive image. The implication of disobedient sons becoming dragons in both tales is representation of dragon as an evil energy. In *Pulau Lancang Gadung*, the disobedient child has a strong liking for *gadung*, a potato-like

root found in many parts of Indonesia. However, one should be careful in consuming *gadung* because of its poisonous nature that it must be dealt with in a specific way to get rid of the poison. Therefore, the maliciousness of *Gadung* (the child) reflects his 'poisonous' nature, just like a dragon that breathes out fire-like toxin from its mouth. In *Si Lancang*, the cursed child becomes a dragon that haunts the surrounding villages, and thus it is an evil dragon.

Langkawi, the island that is cursed for seven generations by Mashuri proves to be slowly developed if compared to any other regions in Malaysia. Although the island is a very beautiful island, Langkawi has not "taken off" the way it should be (Zaman, 2011). Despite the proposed RM1bil investment in Langkawi resort by Khazanah Nasional to revive the island and make it a resort destination comparable with Bali, Phuket, and the Maldives, Langkawi is still not successful and 'lacking the wow effect' (The Star Online 12 December 2010). The Malaysian has also decided the island as duty free island-wide to attract more tourists, but it has not so far been successful. It seems that the Mashuri curse has hindered Langkawi from developing.

Reconstructing Curse Folktales

It is generally believed that folktales impact society. Citraningtyas et. al. (2013) elaborated how the impact of folktales starts since childhood when they are introduced to children. As the children enter society, they bring the values they learn from those folktales, and thus the society is shaped. When these children grow up to be adults, they reaffirm these values to their children and the cycle continues. Consequently, what continues are not only good ingredients in folktales, but also the outdated and unconstructive messages. A cut is therefore necessary to end the unhealthy cycle.

As folktales are not lifeless (Bradkunas, 1975; Citraningtyas 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014), they must grow and adapt with human civilization. Therefore, tales that apparently send negative effects to readers must be reconstructed. Folktale reconstruction is a form of rewriting a folktale to remove and replace the undesired parts but still maintaining the good ingredients to make it more constructive and adapt to today's changes (Citraningtyas, 2012). This has been done throughout history with many well known tales worldwide. Unfortunately, little have been done with curse folktales discussed here although there are apparent negative messages that are handed down through these cursing traditions.

Citraningtyas et.al (2014) published a reconstructed version of the *Malin Kundang* tale, entitled *Nilam Kandung*. *Nilam Kandung* removes the curse to the disobedient son who fails to recognize his mother upon his return to his village after years of living abroad. It,

however, maintains the consequence that the son has to face by removing his belongings during a thunderstorm. Nilam and his wife have to start from zero, with the blessing of his mother, and the three of them live happily ever after.

Prior to the publication of *Nilam Kandung*, the reconstructed tale was tested to 158 respondents aged 9-12 to compare the effect of the tale with the *Malin Kundang* tale on the respondents' readiness to forgive, and on their self-efficacy. The findings of the study demonstrated a change of responses, from negative to positive, after the respondents read *Nilam Kandung*. Those who were exposed to *Nilam Kandung*, were more ready to forgive than those who read *Malin Kundang* (Citraningtyas, et.al. 2013). The self efficacy of respondents who were exposed to *Nilam Kandung* also increased by 10%, while those who read *Malin Kundang* had no increase in their self-efficacy (Citraningtyas et.al. 2014).

With these constructive findings on *Nilam Kandung*, it is apparent that other curse folktales that burden the Indonesian and Malaysian society must be reconstructed too. This kind of reconstruction has uplifted the curse that has burdened the nation and its human resource.

Conclusion

It is clear that the intention of curse folktales is generally to insatiate compliance to authority in a dictatorial way, as well as to teach subordinates to be wholly submissive to their authority. These values are not popular any more in this age nor advantageous to human resource advancement. These values can create negative effects to readers, such as shaping arrogant authority, spirit of unforgiving, and low self-efficacy. *Nilam Kandung*, the reconstructed version, has honed positive attitudes in readers, and has increased their self-efficacy. With such finding, other curse folktales that are not constructive must be reconstructed for the advancement of human resource. This action will hopefully form a nation that is ready to forgive and that has high self-efficacy for Indonesia, and see Langkawi to be developing in a rate parallel to other regions in Malaysia.

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