

## OLD BODY IN NEW CLOTHES: INDONESIAN FOLKTALES IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

**Qanita Masykuroh**

Fakultas Keguruan & Ilmu Pendidikan  
Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta  
[qanita.masykuroh@ums.ac.id](mailto:qanita.masykuroh@ums.ac.id)

### Abstract

*Folktales have significant position in children's books publishing in Indonesia. Folktales for children as part of children's books genres significantly emerge along with other kinds of children's books. It is generally perceived that folktales retain valuable cultural and moral values which need to be preserved and passed down from generation to generation. This paper presents an overview of Indonesian folktales published as children's books. Whilst confirming the booming of publishing folktales for children in the period after reformasi, the article also reveals the unawareness of publishers on the selection of folktales stories presented in children's books. This paper contributes to the discussion of readapting traditional literature in children's books.*

**Keywords:** *Indonesian folktales, children's books, stories selection*

### 1. Introduction

The reformasi era in 1998 opened the gate to a flourishing of print media in Indonesia. One of the signs of the flourishing print industry is the growth of children's books with religious themes. Concurrently, Indonesian book publishers have also been publishing traditional literature, and Indonesian folklore, in versions adapted for children's books. This is closely related to a national continuing concern about the importance of character building education as one of the mandates of the national education acts, an education which underlines on important values for supporting the Indonesian nation building project one of which is multicultural values adopting the spirit of nation motto *Bhineka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in diversity) (Suparno, 2010).

Folktales are cultural 'treasure' of Indonesia, as a postcolonial nation consisting of multicultural and multilingual ethnicities. With its national motto '*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*' meaning 'unity in diversity', the Indonesian government has consistently sought to preserve the entire cultural heritage, and has prioritized such preservation. This is due to the fact that, as a nation, Indonesia would be classified among soft states and with a high risk of

'Balkanization'. The Indonesian government maintains the cultural property of the various ethnolinguistic entities in the interests of national unity. For example, the Indonesian government has undertaken to record and document the oral traditions of Indonesian folktales (Depdikbud, 1977).

Nevertheless, like in most of Third World countries, the colonial history of Indonesia has a direct link to the political, social and economic environment with which its government must deal. Class, race, and ethnic stratification, combined with regional loyalties, restrain the autonomy of the government rulers and limit their room to maneuver. Hence, the effort of publishers to retell folklore in the form of children storybooks, apart of its business purpose, is welcome and supported by the government for purposes of its national unity agenda. In the same fashion, the government encouraged the use of local content to support the national education (Koestito and Kirihio, 2010). The concern and the encouragement are, once more, confirming the significant position of folktales as traditional literature in modern Indonesia, in which the search of national identity is a continuing discourse.

This article presents an overview on the characteristics of Indonesian folktales, the

format of folktales books published in the period of *Reformasi* and the selection of folktales stories.

## 2. The Characteristics of Indonesian Folktales

Folktales rewritten for children differ from other types of genres in children's literature. They have characteristics related to plot, characterization, and setting. This section summarizes the characteristics of Indonesian traditional tales *cerita rakyat* –drawing on the categorization by Danandjaja (1994).

In folktales, conflict and action are abounding. The conflict is usually between person versus person or person versus personified nature. Besides, actions in folktales move rapidly to a climax and stock closing. The origin of folktales from oral tradition made it bring the listener, and later in the written version the reader, quickly into the actions. Frequently, folktales plunge readers into the main conflict within the first few sentences and the conflict between characters typically represents good and evil characters. The conflict which is closely related to the theme of folktales will be discussed in the next section.

In regard to character, folktales character typing is usually symbolic and flat. Most of the characters are unchangeable in the course of the story. The good character is always good and the bad character is always bad, and bad character is accompanied by the character that is always good. In Indonesian folktales, this kind of characters includes *buto* (giant), any kind of ghost, witch, stepmother, jealous sisters and concubine. Besides, the characters also have a limited range of personal characteristics and less completely developed than characters in other types of stories. Hence, the characters are easily identified. The character such as the youngest daughter or the youngest princess (*putri*) is always beautiful and kind, the young man as the main character (*Joko*) is always lucky, the queen is always fair and loving and the hero or heroine is always honourable. In contrast, characters like stepsister, stepmother, concubine, suitor competitor are always envious, wicked or selfish. Also, the conflict typically ended with the success of good

character overcomes, outsmart, or outwits the evil characters.

Concerning the setting of the story, which includes both place and time, time in Indonesian folktales and fairy tales is always the far distant past. Though some Indonesian folktales do not have well-built narrative structure, they generally have typical narrative features of western canonical folktales which include the introductory phrases. In addition, not only the first line of folktales usually places the reader into a time when anything might happen, but it also may also briefly sketch the location. The most common places in Indonesian folktales are a village, a palace, and the woods.

In addition to folktales, other kinds of traditional tales i.e. fables, myth and legend more or less have similar plot and setting as folktales. Moreover, those traditional tales are usually included under the umbrella of folktales terminology.

Indonesian fables are moral tales with animal characters which is meant to entertain and contains human lesson expressed through the foible of personified animals which is explicit and didactic (Toha-Sarumpaet, 2004). The most popular character in Indonesian fables is dominated by mouse deer, a brave, tricky and wit animal. Other characters represent animal living in Asian geographical area such as elephant, tiger, buffalo, monkey, crocodile, snail, and various kinds of bird. The In addition, the fable is short and the characters perform simple, straightforward actions that result in single climax. Some of the themes of the fable stories resemble the themes of other stories. Basically, fable has theme that the good will always outwit the bad, and that the intelligence and teamwork can outwit the physical strength.

Indonesia has five big religions i.e. Islam, Protestant, Catholic, Hindu and Buddha. In addition, it also has many various traditional beliefs. The existence of those religion and beliefs is closely related to the stories in Indonesian myths. Besides, the supernatural characters in myth are always considered divine. The Indonesian Myth is dominated by the stories of Hindu's god and goddess which are mostly derived from Bali and Java, the story

of Muslim saints from Java and Sumatra, and the stories of pagan's gods from various origins.

Most of Indonesian legend retold in children's books tells the stories of the origin of places, food and traditional stuff throughout Indonesia. Besides, the legend also presents glorified past figures with fictional traits and fictional situation.

### 3. Folktales Books' Format

Indonesian folktales published as children's books were of three kinds: single story in a book, some stories from the same origin in a book and a compilation of stories from various regions in a book. Additionally, some publishers published folktales in the form of worksheet activity for early learning by combining the story with activity or coloring pages.

Discussing the physical appearance of the books cannot be separated from business aspects of the book industry. Different appearance was published for different audience and distributed as well as displayed in different places. Single book folktales were usually in the form of pictorial books and though quite rare, in the form of comics; some publishers also published bilingual edition presenting two languages: *Bahasa Indonesia* and English. Some others as well as origin-based compilation books were in the form of children's fiction with some illustrations to support the story printed in black and white edition and in a fewer quantity, sometimes could be found in hard cover colorful edition. The newest format was various origin compilation books which were thicker and in the form of colorful picture story books.

The compilation books are of two kinds: compilation book whose stories are derived from one origin and compilation books whose stories are derived from various origins throughout Indonesia. The term origin refers to ethnicities, a region in a province or a province. Compilation books can contain numerous stories ranging from six stories to 366 stories in one book. Further, the stories vary in length from a very short story with around 100 words to 350 words, the longer stories with around 1500 words, to the longest stories with around 30.000 words. Moreover, there are several

stories in the sample that are similar in themes or variants of a story.

Short stories with around 100 words to 350 words are found in compilation books published by government publisher. The stories are very short and they are merely the transcription of the oral stories collected without any adaptation and addition. The compilation books of this kind have thirty to seventy five stories in a book. Those stories are from the same origin and are presented in both regional language and their Indonesian translation.

The longer stories with around 1500 words are found in other compilation books that have between four to thirty three stories in a book. The number 33 is frequently chosen to represent the number of provinces in Indonesia. Furthermore, the sample also includes a compilation book consisting of 366 stories with the length of each story around 1500 words. In addition to the compilation books, stories with around 30.000 words are found in individual books that have one story in one book.

Despite the great number of folktales stories in children's books, not all of them can be deemed as well developed stories. This can be seen from the lack of narrative structure as well as the lack of well-developed narrative elements in a number of stories.

The lack is generally found in the stories with around 150 words to 350 words, and usually because of a limited space to build up their narrative structure. The narrative structures in such stories are presented very briefly or some of them are even missing. For example, in such above stories the introduction to the character is not clear, and the exposition is frequently skipped. This can be seen in the two shortest stories found in the data:

#### Example 1

'Earthquake, a story from Cibai in 'Cerita Rakyat Manggarai' (2007):

It was told in a story, there was god outside our house, who knows the number of people living on earth. The way that god investigate that number is by shaking all the houses. If the houses are felt heavy, the earth was full of people. On the contrary, if the houses are light,

the earth was empty. Therefore, when there was an earthquake people rushed out of their houses and screamed “earthquake ... earthquake...!” That was the god’s way to know whether or not there were people on earth.

#### Example 2

‘The origin of all food that we eat, a story from *Todo*’ in ‘Dongeng dari Muna’ (2003):

There was an old man in the village of *Todo* named *Poco*. *Poco* always hoped to get food from woods as there had not been any farm and field like what people have today. As he always ate food from woods, one day there came an idea to kill someone, and he wanted to kill an old woman. At the time of the murder, *Poco* said “My food is always derived from wood, so I will kill you to turn your blood and your body into corn, rice, cassava and sweet potatoes”. After killing the woman, *Poco* cut off the woman’s body and spread them around. He also showered them with water wishing that his dream would come true. After a while, what *Poco* hoped came true. All the pieces of the old woman body and her blood turn into various kinds of food. That is the story of the origin of plants. Plants are from (the body of) *Desu* people.

The longer stories with around 1500 words typically have narrative features of western canonical folktales for example the introductory phrase to begin the stories such as once upon a time (*alkisah*), one day (*pada suatu hari*) or a long time ago (*jaman dahulu kala*). In addition, the opening of folktales usually explain the setting of the stories and the introduction of the characters in the story. However, it is found that some stories do not have such introduction. Also, the introduction part that explains the setting of the stories as well as the character is sometimes not clear. This can be seen in the opening of two folktales below:

#### Example 3

‘The magic deer’, a story taken from a folktales compilation book ‘Sari Gading’ (2007):

It is told that in a family, a shameful incident

happened which shocked all people in the village where the family lived. The rumor that the girl in the family was pregnant spread very rapidly. The parents of the girl are so embarrassed that they tried to investigate their daughter to find out the man who impregnated her.

Example 4. ‘The origin of *Putri Duyung*’ in ‘Dongeng dari Muna’ (2003):

“Mother... give me some food, please”, asked a child

“Oh my child, you have eaten, have you?” answered the mother, “Though you only have stale steamed corn, I think that is enough.”

“But mother, I am starving. Give me some food please.”

“What can I give to you?, “We do not have anything to eat, Oh how poor we are.“ “Look at your father, he has not eaten any food for two days” said *Inak Tebon*.

One explanation on the lack of some narrative structures in the above folktales published by *Pusat Bahasa* is because those stories are the result of a project of documenting various oral traditions in Indonesia. The result of documentation is considered to be valuable for children and young adult as a source of knowing and understanding the valuable and diverse of Indonesian cultures. They are then published and regarded as books for children and young adult without any adaptation and appropriation.

Realizing the competition in publishing folktales, a publisher in Bandung focused publishing affordable folktales in pulp paper and black and white edition which surprisingly achieved good response. Until 5 years of its establishment in 2005, it has produced more than a hundred single book folktales for children. This kind of folktales for children seems to get good response from the markets especially those from outside Java. Further, regardless of price consideration, the single book folktales were preferable as the source for children in accomplishing their school assignment, as the children’s access to other sources such as internet was still limited.

These book formats, with their vast

variation in price, slot into different location within the market. Formally, books could be found at the main bookshops in the country, however; not all publishers can display their books at those shop as there are some requirements which is hard for publishers, especially small publishers, to fulfill. Books priced less than 15.000 produced by small publishers could usually be found at smaller bookshop or book agency or even in small pavement displays, in book kiosks established in book halls near traditional markets, or on the stalls of periodic markets,

The development of folktales books format is delighting and the contemporary book format has enabled folktales to be comparable with other genre of children's books. However, the question is whether or not the content of folktales book as the result of selection and adaptation process has been as developed as its format.

#### 4. The Selection of Stories

The process of selecting folktales retold as children stories together with the adaptation process are indispensable aspects in publishing folktales for children. Folktales as a cultural expression can reflect accepted cultural norms held by a society. Originally, folktales were not specifically created for children and they can contain all aspects of human life including violence. Such violence is inevitable, to the extent that it is narratively inherent. Hence, retelling folktales for children needs appropriation, and adaptation.

The selection of stories generally demonstrates folktales popularity and the purpose of presenting Indonesian cultural diversity. Furthermore, the depiction of violence and some inappropriate contents seem to be prevalent.

Single book folktales and origin-based compilation folktales usually present popular stories which appear to resemble earlier folktales editions. The source of folktales retold in the children's books is mostly from the earlier folktales books publishing. In addition, the stories are also taken from online source i.e. websites that provide folktales stories.

An exception happens to folktales written

in cooperation with regional government and folktales published by *Pusat Bahasa* (the government language center) that use research archive as their source. The archive was resulted from the project of documenting Indonesian oral tradition conducted by the ministry of culture and education.

The sources of folktales can be seen in the references at the end of the folktales books for children, nevertheless; it is found that some folktales including those written in cooperation with regional government adversely do not present, by any means, the sources of the stories in their publication. Correspondingly, *Pusat Bahasa* as one of the center for Indonesian folktales archive does not make any recommendation to publisher to use its archive sources, although *Pusat bahasa* always welcomes all publishers that do so. Moreover, the folktales published for children by *Pusat Bahasa* is a government project meaning that the books produced are not for gaining profit. *Pusat bahasa* always distributes the folktales for free to libraries, schools and other institutions that need the folktales. The unbeneficial nature of the folktales rewriting project by *Pusat bahasa* resulted in the loose relationship between *Pusat Bahasa* and publishers in relation to folktales publishing industry. Additionally, the pragmatic business consideration as well as the lack of knowledge on folktales also seems to lead the publishers' unawareness to search for authentic sources.

The publisher's process of finding sources for selecting folktales indicates a fundamental issue of authenticity. Authenticity relates to the cultural extent to which a book represents the cultures to which they are attached, reflecting the authenticating details of language and everyday life for members of that cultural group. In the same way, Norton(2012) notes the issue of authenticity as essential in the selection of multicultural children's literature. Further, scholars also pointed out that the inauthentic sources might lead to the inaccurate of cultural portrayal in children's books Harada (1995).

Despite the significant of authentic sources for folktales, the criteria for the evaluation of traditional materials have not yet established (Hearne, 1993). Moreover, the discussion on the

cultural authenticity of folktales can expand to an assessment of the writers and the illustrator's cultural membership of the ethnic depicted in the story background. Although some scholars also maintain that this lack of cultural membership can be overcome by research and use of reliable sources (Guevara, 2003), there has not been a great concern on this problem in Indonesia.

Besides the source for folktales rewriting; another consideration in the process of selection of stories is popularity. Bunanta points out that the popularity of folktales refers to how frequent folktales are selected to publish (1998). Also, the popularity can be gained by the first tale published bringing a theme whose versions are found in many regions in Indonesia (Citraningtyas, 2006). The finding confirms that stories that get told across multiple media communication usually get the most attention as in the case of 'Bawang Merah Bawang Putih' (The Red Onion and The White Onion) and 'Malin Kundang' that might take place as books, comic, VCD and as television series. This multiple platform delivery which is usually called as 'transmedia' storytelling is positively a way for folktales to retain (Henry, 2006).

Although popular stories have close relation to the market orientation, popularity could be fashioned, and publishers can introduce the less popular folktales so that the folktales could get popularity.

A non-market consideration in story selection is by gaining cooperation and support of regional governments in which the publisher get consistent orders to publish regional folktales children's books from regional governments which need to introduce their local traditional stories.

This ideal is usually part of the company mission to participate in promoting traditional cultures. Further, it can be the ideal of publishers to complete all the children's genres in their children's book publication. Although, compared to the publishing of other children's books genres, the profit of such folktales publishing is not quite promising; it is probably not a big problem financially as the publisher had gained much more profit from other genres

of children's book publication.

Besides the popularity of stories, the purpose to represent the diversity of Indonesia appears to be a determining factor in publishing Indonesian folktales for children. It is an ideal to provide children's books representing the diversity of Indonesia. However, the realization of this idea cannot be separated from business situation and publishers succeed to varying extents. One way the publishers do to execute the idea is by publishing folktales in the form of compilation books. Compilation books are practical as the readers only need to buy one book to get the complete representation of stories from all Indonesian provinces. One of the bigger problems is on the tight competition among publisher that publishes the same 'menu' with the similar servings.

Another problem is that the more the stories are needed to be included, the thicker book it becomes which then leads to the expensive price. However, folktales for children in the form of compilation books are generally sold in big bookstores in big cities, meaning that the books is directed to target children from educated family background living in cities believed that price was not a major consideration in their market, having interest more on something fast to read and easy to consume books.

It is important to note that despite the business aspect, the folktales popularity and the presentation of cultural diversity are related to the granted idea that folktales are always good sources for educating moral values and introducing traditional cultures so that folktales are always in needs.

Therefore, the real target markets for such folktales books are essentially not the children but their parents. The decision to buy books is still on adults and there is always a place for Indonesian folktales in their choice.

Additionally, publishing Indonesian folktales for children seems to be relatively easier in process of production primarily because of the availability of rich sources of the stories and the significant position of folktales in society. Besides, Indonesian folktales for children are a kind of books that are always needed in Indonesian education as the

companion books. Although the companion books are not compulsory books for school children to have, their publication is encouraged as it aims at providing the reinforcement for children education.

### 5. Concluding remarks

It is perceived that folktales have significant cultural and moral values that need to be introduced to children and therefore publishing folktales as children's book becomes significant. Yet, the process of folktales publishing shows the unawareness of most publishers on the selection stories to present for children. This is shown by the stories presented in folktales books which mainly indicate the popularity and the diversity of the folktales. Moreover, retelling folktales for children still has further challenge which deals with the source of folktales to be rewritten. This confirmed the findings of previous studies on the problems in the retelling of Indonesian folktales (Bunanta, 1998).

It is clear then Folktales seem to be a genre that is always recommended by adults, and the need for its availability is always recalled periodically but in fact they are not relatively preferred by children.

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