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# READERS' RESPONSES ON INDONESIAN FOLK-TALES: A PROPOSAL FOR FOLKTALE RECONSTRUCTION

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**Abstract.** Being one of the many important tools to educate children, folktales are rarely evaluated. Parents and educators tend to put too much trust on folktales that they never question values embedded in folktales. As a result, many folktales remain static despite the growth and change in society, which causes disconnection in the education of young generation. This is especially true in the Indonesian context. In this study, 199 Indonesians participated in the survey on their judgement of values embedded in today's Indonesian folktales and on the necessity to alter some folktales. The result of the survey suggests that the respondents can see the positive and negative elements incorporated in Indonesian folktales. This fact underlines the urgency of rewriting and reconstructing Indonesian folktales. This paper addresses the need to reconstruct those folktales that are not anymore suitable for today's society.

## 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; Suharti & Pramono, 2016). Zipes (2002) even states that folktales are deliberately written and geared to educate children. Folktales are also used to 'shape' nations (Citraningtyas, 2010; Johnston, 2000). A nation's values are, in large parts, handed down through folktales that have been passed on through generations by word of mouth then through printed materials, and more recently, through digital means.

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 with society's expectations. Through folktales, children are endlessly taught on how to be proper members of society. Indonesian folktales, too, have been used as a pervasive tool throughout generations in sustaining this cultural heritage. It is unsurprising that folktales have earned a high trust amongst parents and educators. Folktales continue to be favored when parents and educators select books for their children.

If folktales continue to be an important educational tool and to form a national identity, serious questions should then be posed. Do all folktales contain positive teachings? Do all folktales carry values that are appropriate for today's society? Have

parents and educators carefully evaluated the values incorporated in folktales? Are folktales that support nonconstructive 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 be more relevant to today's readers? These questions are important to be addressed in relation to making folktales a healthy form of edutainment for children (Arnas, 2016; Citraningtyas, Tangkilisan, & Pramono, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Yildiz & Kayili, 2015).

Bradkunas (1975) stated that folktales are supposed to grow and adapt with the growth of societies. Folktales must not interfere with 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. There has been a mixture of opinion among Indonesians on whether Indonesian in the folktales can carry disturbing values and whether reconstruction is needed for those folktales.

Comprehending the importance of folktales, how it wins the high trust from educators and parents, yet the static condition of Indonesian folktales, it is important to know what Indonesians

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think of their folktales. However, there has been no or little study done to discover the opinions of Indonesian. The objective of this paper is to discover what Indonesians really think of their folktales. This paper presents the opinions of Indonesian respondents on what they say about their own folktale.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Folktales educate children, and in doing so, folktales shape the society and shape the nation. Society thus determines the desired values to be passed on to young generation, and transport those values through its folktales to shape the future generation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that educators and parents trust folktales so much that they believe folktales contain guaranteed teachings for children. It is unfortunate, however, that not all folktales carry positive values or values that are appropriate for today's society. For addressing these challenges, folktale reconstruction is urgently needed.

What is a folktale reconstruction? The English word reconstruction is taken from the word to reconstruct. The Webster (2017) dictionary states that 'to reconstruct' means 'to establish', 'to form', 'to assemble again', or 'to reassemble'. By 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 (Webster, 2017).

In many parts of the world, folktale reconstruction is not a new entity and has been done throughout history to a number of popular 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 to the societal changes. As we know it, Cinderella was first written by Perrault (1697) entitled *Cendrillon*.

In the Grimm and Grimm (1812) published version, 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 (Grimm & Grimm, 1812; Robbins, 1998).

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 Perrault (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 is 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 relieve children's tension and give them hope of facing challenges in life.

The changes in the above well-known folktales are verification 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.

Indonesia is rich of folktales. It is unfortunate that a large majority of its folktales have not undergone any changes, including those that carry disturbing values. In order to seek the current opinion of Indonesian readers on the subject, the following survey was conducted.

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to find out the number of respondents who agree or disagree on the issue of folktale reconstruction, and to find out the proportion of the respondents who agree or disagree on the matter. Therefore quantitative method is employed in this research.

The research was conducted between May and July 2016, involving 199 respondents consisting of 110 females and 89 males. The respondents' age ranged between 11 and 70 years old. The respondents' occupations were varied: business people, educators, students, banking, government officials, media, tourism, medical, and others. They originated from different parts of Indonesia, from the western part of Indonesia to the eastern part of Indonesia.

The data were collected using two methods:

### 1. Online survey

In this survey, respondents were invited through email, and were asked to answer the questions online.

### 2. Paper-and-pencil survey

In this survey, respondents were asked to answer the questions on hard copy.

There were seven statements, and the respondents were asked to choose one response, whether to strongly disagree, disagree, be neutral, agree or strongly agree to the statements. The statements were as follows:

- I have read/been read to Indonesian folktales since childhood.
- Indonesian folktales contain positive teachings that are good to be passed on to readers.
- Indonesian folktales contain negative teachings that are not good to be passed on to readers.

- Indonesian folktales must be maintained.
- Indonesian folktales must neither be altered nor be changed.
- Indonesian folktales that contain negative teachings need to be altered or changed.
- Values embeded in Indonesian folktales must be adapted to society development.

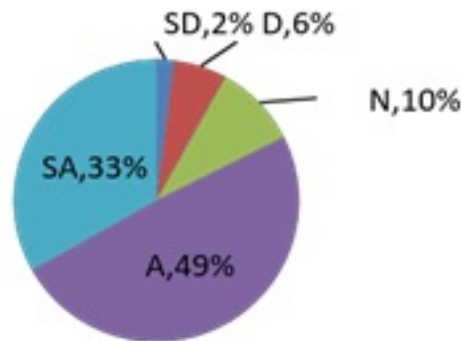
At the end of the survey, the respondents were asked to mention one folktale they know, and list the positive and negative teachings in it.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study found some interesting findings. The following are the responses made by the respondents for each of the statements:

Figure 1, below shows that 82% of respondents, 33% strongly agree, and 49% agree have been exposed to Indonesian folktales since their childhood. This reflects a strong knowledge of and relationship with Indonesian folktales. The rest of the respondents especially the 2% giving statement to strongly disagree, do not mean they do not know Indonesian folktales at all. Their exposure to Indonesian folktales may happen later in life.

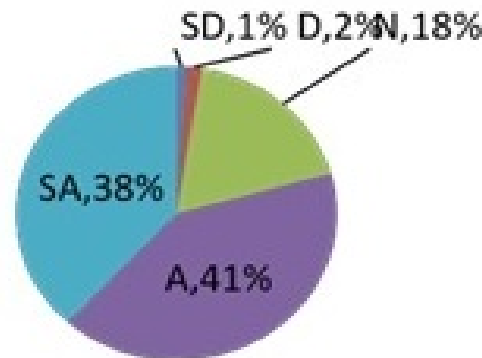
**FIGURE 1**  
I have Read / been Read to Indonesian Folktale Since Childhood



In answering the question whether or not Indonesian folktales contain positive teachings, the majority of Indonesian respondents agree i.e., 41% and 38% were strongly agree that Indonesian folktales contain positive teachings. Only 1% of respon-

dents strongly disagree, and 2% disagree that there are positive teachings. It reflects respondents' strong trust on positive teachings embedded in Indonesian folktales. Figure 2, below presents the responses for this question.

**FIGURE 2**  
Indonesian Folktales Contain Positive Teachings



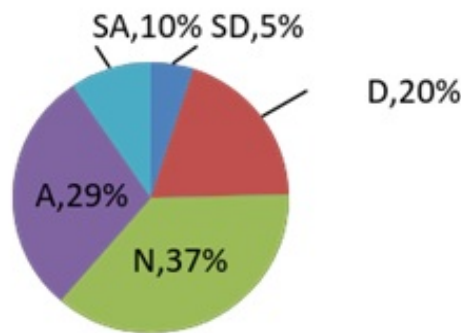
On the question whether or not Indonesian folktales contain negative teachings, 37% of Indonesian respondents are neutral about it. It shows how the majority of respondents prefer to be on the safe ground in expressing an opinion on the presence

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 embedded within the

folktales. 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% are added, the sum is 38%. It is still higher than those who are neutral, and sig-

nificantly higher than those who disagree 20% and strongly disagree 5%. This indicates how Indonesian respondents are already self-critical to acknowledge that there are negative elements too embedded in Indonesian folktales among the positive elements. The response for this question can be seen in Figure 3, below:

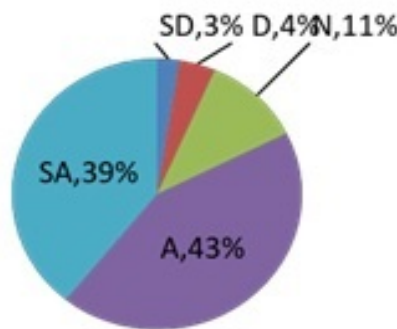
**FIGURE 3**  
**Indonesian Folktales Contain Negative Teachings**



In Figure 4, it is apparent that the majority of respondents wish to maintain Indonesian folktales. 82% of respondents strongly agree and agree that Indonesian folktales must be maintained.

11% are neutral. Only 7% of respondents strongly disagree to the idea. It reflects the strong importance of folktales that continues to be used as edutainment tools for children.

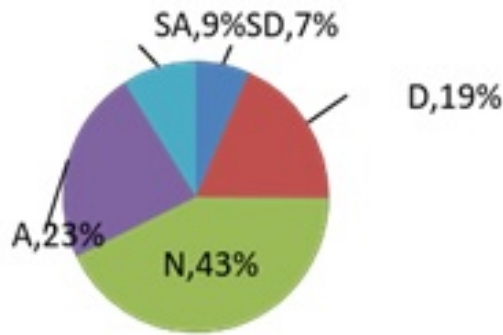
**FIGURE 4**  
**Indonesian Folktales must be Maintained**



When the respondents are posed with the question regarding their opinion to alter or change Indonesian folktales i.e., Figure 5, the majority of respondents still favor the safest option, that is to be neutral are 43%. This neutral position, however, can also 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 alteration of Indonesian folktales that contain negative teachings, those who agree/strongly agree 32% are significantly higher than those who disagree/strongly disagree 25%. This indication is more apparent if interpreted together with the result of the next question.

**FIGURE 5**  
**Indonesian Folktales Must not be Altered nor Changed**



When the question regarding the necessity to alter or change a folktale is given a condition only for folktales that contain negative teachings i.e, Figure 6, the majority of respondents agree with the proposal to change or alter. A total of 71% of respondents strongly agree and agree to alter folktales that have

negative teachings. Only a small percentage 13% of respondents strongly disagrees and disagrees with the idea. This is a strong indication that Indonesians are prepared for folktale reconstruction. This will be more apparent in the next and final question.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Indonesian Folktales that Contain Negative Teachings Need be Altered or Changed**

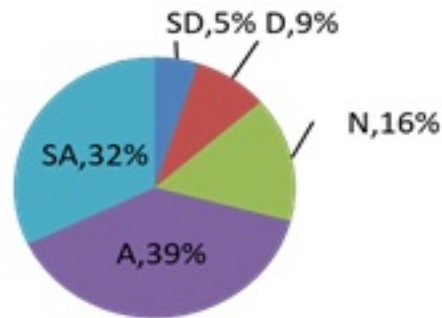
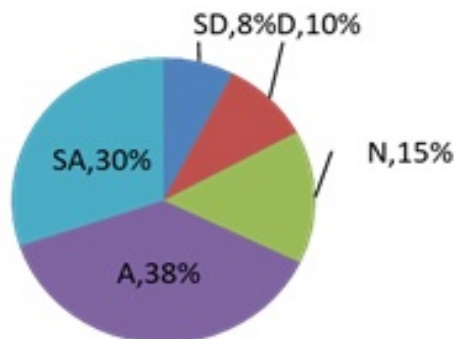


Figure 7, below features the last statement that the respondents need to respond. When questioned whether values embedded in folktales need to be adapted to changes in society, the majority

of respondents, 68% were strongly agreed and agreed to the idea. Only 17% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed to the idea.

**FIGURE 7**  
**Values Embded in Indonesian Folktales must be Adapted to Society Development**





In response to the request to mention one Indonesian folktale with its positive and negative elements, the folktales that the respondents mentioned are: Malin Kundang, Kopong Belopor, Si Kancil, Bawant Merah Bawang Putih, Sangkuriang, Pak Belalang, Asal Mula Danau Toba, Timun Mas, Rara Jonggrang, Jaka Tarub, Toar dan Lumimuut, Batu Bedaong, Limonu, Goa Mampu, Batu Nong, and Asal-Usul Selat Bali.

The Indonesian nation is, in fact, rich in folktales. Unfortunately, as this survey reflects, and as Citraningtyas (2004, 2011, 2012, 2013) found, the nation owns many 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 from searching for more positive alternatives.

There are a number of interesting findings in this survey. A large majority of the respondents who are familiar with Indonesian folktales since childhood, agree that Indonesian folktales contain positive teachings. And thus, most of them agree that Indonesian folktales must be maintained. This is in line with Zipe (2002) researches that folktales have won so much trust in society that children books are flooded with folktales. People continue to believe that folktales contain great teachings that they must be maintained. Interestingly, however, the respondents in this study are able to identify that some folktales may

carry negative values. This is to challenge Robbins (1998) findings, that the legitimacy of folktales may continue to be questioned (101). As the Indonesian respondents are able to recognize that despite the importance of folktales, folktales may carry negative values. The findings of this survey show that Indonesians are ready to respond positively to the call to make Indonesian folktales evolve with time.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

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 the expected behaviour. As teaching tools, however, some Indonesian folktales may be concerning because 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.

The result of this study demonstrates that Indonesians are able to be self-critical in seeing both the positive and negative elements embedded in their own folktales. Indonesians also show some readiness to accept folktale reconstruction. It is recommended that folktales that carry negative teachings need to be reconstructed to function in a positive Indonesian society. The folktales that are listed by the respondents can be the starting point.

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