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Local Wisdom and Cultural Identity in Selected English Versions of Indonesian Folktales

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how local wisdom and cultural identity are represented in selected English versions of Indonesian folktales. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study examines three folktales available in Ruangguru's publicly accessible narrative-text materials: Malin Kundang, Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, and Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi. The data consisted of words, phrases, dialogues, descriptive passages, and narrative episodes that represented moral values, kinship relations, belief systems, and symbolic links between people and place. The analysis involved repeated reading, manual coding, thematic categorization, interpretation of narrative elements, and cross-textual synthesis. The findings show that local wisdom is represented through moral causality, kinship and domestic obligation, and cosmology and mythic relation to place. In the selected texts, ethical conduct is made visible through reward, punishment, transformation, and landscape memory. Cultural identity is therefore embedded in family relations, moral consequences, supernatural justice, and explanations of social and natural order. The study contributes to literary and cultural studies by showing how English versions of Indonesian folktales can preserve and rearticulate local wisdom through narrative form.

Keywords: cultural identity, English versions, Indonesian folklore, literary representation, local wisdom

INTRODUCTION

Local wisdom remains an important foundation of Indonesian cultural life because it preserves communal ethics, kinship principles, customary knowledge, and collective ways of interpreting human relationships, nature, and belief. In multilingual and increasingly global contexts, the transmission of local values depends not only on oral continuity or regional-language use, but also on how local culture is represented through wider linguistic media. Language is closely connected with identity and belonging, and the weakening of local expressive forms may affect the preservation of communal meaning (Robinson-Jones, 2024; Wejak, 2021). For this reason, Indonesian cultural narratives that circulate in English deserve scholarly attention not merely as translated stories, but as sites where local meanings are selected, organized, and made legible to wider audiences.

Among various forms of cultural expression, folktales occupy a distinctive position because they transmit moral imagination, social norms, symbolic beliefs, and memories of place across generations. Folklore is not only entertainment; it is a cultural text through which communities preserve shared understandings of virtue, obligation, taboo, harmony, and justice. Recent research continues to show that Indonesian folklore embodies local wisdom and participates in value formation, identity construction, and cultural continuity (Andriani & Aulia, 2023; Novianti, 2022; Sawita et al., 2024; Stefani et al., 2024; Syarifuddin et al., 2022; Wedawati et al., 2022). Studies of oral literature also indicate that symbolic performance, myth, and story-based memory can sustain cultural identity and ecological or social worldviews (Karim et al., 2025; Magfirah et al., 2025; Nursalam et al., 2024). These insights suggest that folktales need to be read not only for the values they contain, but also for the narrative mechanisms through which those values become meaningful.

This study is grounded in representation theory, particularly the view that texts do not passively mirror culture but actively construct meaning through language, signs, and narrative form. Hall (1997) argues that representation is a meaning-making practice in which cultural ideas become intelligible through systems of signification. From this perspective, cultural identity is not merely stated in a text; it is produced through patterns of characterization, conflict, symbolism, and resolution. In this study, Hall's perspective informed the coding and interpretation by treating characters, speech acts, conflicts, settings, supernatural events, and endings as signifying elements. The analysis therefore examined not only which values were present, but also how those values became meaningful through narrative relations and symbolic consequences.

Several recent studies have addressed related issues of folklore, translation, and cultural transfer. Latranita et al. (2024) analyze cultural terms in an English translation of Indonesian folklore, while Setyawan et al. (2023) examine cultural resistance and negotiation in the English localization of an Indonesian folklore-based digital narrative. Hendrawan and Kamayana (2024), Mukminin et al. (2025), Lai and Zhao (2025), and Deng (2024) likewise show that translation and cultural adaptation involve choices about what is retained, explained, transformed, or repositioned. In educational contexts, Fahmy et al. (2025), Quý and Phương (2023), and Ocsis et al. (2024) show that folktales remain significant because they communicate values through memorable characters and narrative consequences. Collectively, these studies confirm that folklore, language, and identity are deeply interconnected.

The circulation of Indonesian folktales in English is particularly important because it places local narratives within a broader field of readership, education, and cultural interpretation. English versions may make the stories accessible to learners, teachers, translators, and international readers who do not share the same cultural background as the originating community. This wider circulation can strengthen cultural visibility, but it can also simplify symbolic meanings if folktales are treated only as plot-based moral stories. A representational reading therefore needs to examine how characters are positioned, how moral conflicts are sequenced, how punishments and rewards are justified, and how supernatural events become culturally meaningful.

Despite these contributions, a clearer literary gap remains. Previous studies on Indonesian folktales have often focused on identifying moral values, documenting local wisdom in oral tradition, examining educational relevance, or analyzing culture-specific terms

in translation. Less attention has been given to English versions of Indonesian folktales as literary representations in which local wisdom and cultural identity are constructed through character relations, conflict patterns, moral consequence, symbolic transformation, and mythic explanations of place. In other words, earlier research has frequently asked what values are present, whereas the present study asks how those values and identities are represented in English narrative form. This gap is significant because English versions of folktales now circulate in educational, digital, and translingual spaces, where cultural specificity may either be sustained, simplified, or rearticulated (Baron et al., 2024; Fatmahwati et al., 2024; Firdaus, 2025).

Based on this gap, the objective of this study is to examine how local wisdom and cultural identity are represented in selected English versions of Indonesian folktales. Focusing on Malin Kundang, Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, and Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi, the study analyzes how cultural values are articulated through characterization, kinship relations, taboo, supernatural sanction, moral resolution, and mythic relation to place. The study contributes a representation-based reading that shows how English can function as a medium of cultural mediation rather than merely a vehicle of linguistic transfer.

The research is guided by the following question: how are local wisdom and cultural identity represented through narrative form in selected English versions of Malin Kundang, Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, and Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi? By placing the question at the level of representation, the study examines not only the presence of cultural values, but also the textual strategies through which those values become readable in English.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed qualitative textual analysis to examine how local wisdom and cultural identity are represented in English versions of Indonesian folktales. This design was selected because the data consisted of written literary texts, and the study aimed to interpret cultural meanings embedded in narrative forms rather than measure variables statistically. Qualitative textual and document-based analysis is appropriate for examining how meaning is constructed through recurring textual patterns, contextual interpretation, and analytical comparison (Miles et al., 2014; Morgan & Nica, 2020; Ochieng et al., 2022; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021).

Data Sources

The data sources were selected English versions of three Indonesian folktales: Malin Kundang, Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, and Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi. The texts were taken from Ruangguru's publicly available narrative-text materials (Swawikanti, 2025). Ruangguru was chosen because it provides accessible English narrative-text materials for school-level readers and represents one form of public educational circulation of Indonesian folktales in English. The study treats these texts as selected examples of English retellings, not as representative of all Indonesian folktales or all versions of the three stories. They were selected purposively based on four criteria: each text had to be an English version of a widely

known Indonesian folktale, contain clear representations of local wisdom or cultural identity, provide sufficient narrative detail for literary analysis, and be publicly accessible in a stable written form. These criteria helped ensure that the selected texts were culturally relevant and analytically comparable.

Instruments

The instrument used in the study was a researcher-developed coding sheet. The coding sheet recorded the folktale title, relevant excerpt, paragraph location, preliminary code, thematic category, representational element, and short analytical note. The unit of analysis included words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, descriptive passages, and narrative episodes that reflected local wisdom or cultural identity. Following the representation framework, the coding sheet also noted how meanings were produced through characterization, conflict, speech acts, symbolic objects, supernatural events, and narrative resolution. Examples of relevant indicators included respect for parents, patience, humility, greed, taboo, supernatural justice, transformation, domestic obligation, and mythic explanation of place.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection began by compiling the selected English versions into one working corpus. Each text was read repeatedly to understand its plot, characters, setting, conflict, and implied moral structure. During the first reading, excerpts related to cultural values and identity were highlighted. During subsequent readings, the highlighted excerpts were coded manually and grouped into provisional categories. Initial codes included filial disobedience, maternal sacrifice, household injustice, greed, magical reward, supernatural punishment, taboo, transformation, and place-based memory. Similar excerpts were then compared across the three folktales to identify recurring representational patterns. For instance, scenes involving parental reverence or filial denial were grouped under kinship ethics, while episodes involving curses, magical intervention, or transformation were grouped under belief systems and symbolic worldview.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted in four stages. First, repeated reading was used to identify culturally meaningful excerpts. Second, manual coding was used to classify textual evidence into preliminary categories. Third, the preliminary codes were compared, merged, and refined into broader thematic categories. Codes such as filial denial, maternal sacrifice, and social shame were consolidated under kinship and domestic obligation, while codes such as curse, magical intervention, stone, flower, and mountain formation were examined in relation to cosmology and mythic relation to place. Fourth, cross-textual synthesis was used to compare similarities and differences among the three folktales. To support analytical trustworthiness, each interpretation was checked against the full narrative context, short textual evidence was retained in the findings, and category boundaries were reviewed repeatedly to ensure consistency between evidence, interpretation, and conclusion. The analysis was limited to the selected English versions, so the findings should be understood as a close reading of these texts rather than a generalization to all Indonesian folktales.

RESULTS

The analysis identified three dominant representational patterns across the selected English versions of Indonesian folktales. Local wisdom was represented through moral causality, kinship and domestic obligation, and cosmology and mythic relation to place. These dimensions appear in different narrative forms in each story, but they collectively show how cultural identity is embedded in ethical action, family relations, supernatural sanction, and symbolic connections between human conduct and the natural world. Table 1 summarizes the main findings before the detailed discussion of each pattern.

Table 1

Summary of Representational Patterns in the Selected Folktales

Dimension	Evidence Across Texts	Narrative Mechanism	Cultural Meaning
Moral causality	Rejection, greed, violence, deception, and taboo produce visible consequences.	Reward, punishment, reversal, and transformation.	Ethical conduct is linked to social and supernatural justice.
Kinship and domestic obligation	Mother-son duty, stepfamily injustice, and forbidden mother-son relation structure the plots.	Family conflict, recognition, endurance, and prohibition.	Identity is formed through relational responsibility and household ethics.
Cosmology and mythic place	Storm, stone, magical fish, flower, supernatural task, and mountain formation appear as symbolic events.	Curse, magical intervention, taboo prevention, and etiological ending.	Human conduct is connected to belief, nature, and collective memory.

Moral Causality and Ethical Sanction

The first finding is that the three folktales represent local wisdom through a strong logic of moral causality. Ethical values are not explained only through direct moral statements; they are dramatized through action, consequence, and resolution. Virtue is associated with reward, restoration, or dignity, while wrongdoing results in punishment, loss, shame, or irreversible transformation. This pattern is clearest in Malin Kundang, where the son's public rejection of his mother becomes the central moral violation. His statement, “Who is this old beggar? I have no mother like her!”, functions as the verbal climax of his downfall because it converts social embarrassment into filial denial. The subsequent storm and transformation into stone make his disobedience permanent and visible.

Bawang Merah Bawang Putih presents moral causality through contrast rather than public betrayal. Bawang Putih is represented as patient, kind, and hardworking, while her stepmother and Bawang Merah are associated with cruelty, envy, and greed. The magical fish recognizes Bawang Putih's suffering and rewards her sincerity through the instruction, “Keep this flower safe.” By contrast, Bawang Merah imitates the outward action but not the inner virtue that justifies the blessing. The fish's rebuke, “You are selfish and wicked,” makes the moral judgment explicit before the stolen flower becomes a stone attached to her hand. The story therefore suggests that reward depends not merely on action, but on moral intention.

In Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi, moral causality is more complex because the narrative does not rely on a simple opposition between good and evil. Sangkuriang's killing of Tumang and his concealment of the truth create the first moral rupture. His later desire to marry Dayang Sumbi unknowingly violates kinship boundaries, and the impossible task of building a lake and boat “before the sun rose” becomes the narrative test through which taboo is managed.

When the unfinished boat becomes Mount Tangkuban Perahu, or an “upturned boat,” failed desire is transformed into landscape. The punishment is therefore not immediate but accumulative, moving from violence and deception to exile, ignorance, taboo, and catastrophe.

Across the three texts, moral causality works because the consequences are proportionate to the kind of violation represented. Malin's rejection of his mother is punished through petrification, a permanent sign of emotional hardness and social shame. Bawang Merah's greed is punished through an attached stone, a bodily reminder of envy and theft. Sangkuriang's violation of taboo is marked through landscape formation, which makes the failed transgression part of collective memory. These textual details show that ethical sanction is not arbitrary. The narrative consequence translates moral failure into a visible and culturally memorable form.

Kinship, Domestic Order, and Social Identity

The second finding is that local wisdom is strongly represented through kinship, household relations, and social obligation. In all three folktales, family is not merely a background for the plot; it is the central moral structure. The stories imagine what a child owes a parent, how domestic conduct reveals character, and what happens when familial bonds are denied, abused, or violated. Through this pattern, cultural identity is presented as relational rather than individualistic.

In Malin Kundang, kinship is represented through the emotionally unequal but morally binding relationship between a mother and her son. The story establishes maternal sacrifice as the ethical foundation of the narrative: the mother raises Malin alone, works tirelessly, and gives him permission to pursue success while reminding him not to forget his origin. His public rejection of her is therefore more than an act of rudeness; it is an attempt to replace kinship with status. Because he is ashamed of his poor background, he denies the relationship that made his success possible. The text thus constructs social identity as a moral choice between loyalty to origin and desire for social prestige.

In Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, the domestic sphere becomes a moral arena shaped by stepfamily hierarchy, unequal labor, and emotional exclusion. Bawang Putih's hope of being treated as family is disappointed by the cruelty of her stepmother and stepsister, who give her domestic work while privileging Bawang Merah. Yet the story does not simply represent the household as oppressive. It uses domestic disorder to make visible patience, sincerity, and moral endurance. Bawang Putih's tears by the river externalize the emotional burden of household injustice, and the magical fish functions as a witness to suffering that the family refuses to recognize. By the end of the story, her kindness is socially acknowledged, showing that identity is formed in the household and later recognized by the wider community.

In Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi, kinship is represented as a symbolic boundary that protects social and cosmic order. The recognition of the scar turns romantic desire into horror because Dayang Sumbi realizes that the man who wishes to marry her is her own son. Her impossible demand is a strategy to prevent the collapse of familial law into incestuous union. The ending, in which the failed boat becomes a mountain, shows that broken kinship is not limited to private tragedy but becomes part of cultural memory. In this folktale, individual desire must submit to kinship structure, and the violation of kinship boundaries produces consequences beyond the household.

These kinship patterns also indicate that the selected folktales construct social identity through obligation rather than individual achievement alone. Malin's wealth does not produce moral dignity because it is detached from gratitude and origin. Bawang Putih's social recognition emerges only after the story has established her ethical conduct within the household. Sangkuriang's strength and supernatural capacity cannot legitimize his desire because it violates the family structure that defines social order. In this sense, the stories represent identity as something tested within relationships. A person becomes morally recognizable through how they respond to parents, siblings, household authority, and inherited boundaries.

Cosmology, Taboo, and Mythic Relation to Place

The third finding concerns the representation of belief systems, taboo, and mythic relation to place. In the selected folktales, morality is not separated from the supernatural or from the natural world. Curses, magical intervention, transformation, and etiological explanation connect human conduct to a wider symbolic order. Supernatural elements are therefore not decorative additions; they help construct the moral universe of the stories.

In Malin Kundang, cosmology is represented through the transformation of moral guilt into physical matter. After Malin denies his mother, the weather and sea become agents of judgment: the sky darkens, the sea becomes violent, lightning strikes, and he turns into stone. The sea, which initially functions as the space of travel and success, becomes the medium of punishment. The stone image is important because it makes disobedience permanent and retellable. Moral failure is not only punished; it is attached to a visible object that can continue to communicate cultural memory.

In Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi, the link between moral conflict and place is even stronger. The story explains the origin of Mount Tangkuban Perahu through a failed attempt to complete a supernatural task. Time, nature, and spiritual forces are involved in preventing a forbidden union. The landscape becomes an archive of taboo, anger, deception, and failed transgression. This mythic explanation makes cultural identity spatial: a place is not merely a geographical object but a narrative memory of moral law.

In Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, supernatural justice appears in a more domestic and symbolic form. The magical fish, the flower, and the punishment of the stolen flower show that moral order is upheld by forces beyond the human household. The fish recognizes Bawang Putih's suffering before the family corrects it, while the stone attached to Bawang Merah's hand exposes greed materially. This pattern shows that the supernatural world functions as an alternative moral witness when human relations become unjust.

The different forms of supernatural response also reveal different scales of cultural meaning. Malin Kundang moves from family betrayal to cosmic punishment at sea. Bawang Merah Bawang Putih moves from domestic injustice to magical compensation and exposure. Sangkuriang moves from taboo to the creation of a named landscape. These scales show that local wisdom operates simultaneously at household, social, and cosmological levels. The stories make readers imagine a world in which private actions are never completely private because moral disorder can be witnessed by nature, magical beings, and inherited cultural memory.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that English versions of Indonesian folktales can preserve local wisdom through narrative structure rather than through direct moral explanation alone. This supports earlier studies that identify Indonesian folklore as a medium for transmitting moral, social, and cultural values (Andriani & Aulia, 2023; Novianti, 2022; Sawita et al., 2024; Syarifuddin et al., 2022; Wedawati et al., 2022). The present study extends these value-based discussions by showing that cultural meanings are organized through representational mechanisms: moral conflict is linked to consequence, kinship is made the basis of social identity, and supernatural or natural transformation turns private action into collective memory.

The moral dimension of the findings aligns with studies that view folktales as effective tools for value formation and cultural preservation. Quý and Phương (2023) argue that fairy tales remain powerful because they communicate values through memorable oppositions and outcomes, while Ocsis et al. (2024) show that Malin Kundang is often used to teach respect for parents in narrative learning contexts. The present study confirms this pedagogical relevance but places stronger emphasis on literary representation. Morality becomes persuasive because it is narratively embodied in visible signs of consequence, such as stone, burden, failed desire, and transformed landscape.

The findings also indicate that Indonesian cultural identity in these English versions is relational. Identity is defined through family responsibility, domestic conduct, filial obligation, and respect for social boundaries. This is consistent with studies showing that oral tradition and folklore preserve symbolic meanings central to community identity (Fatmahwati et al., 2024; Magfirah et al., 2025; Nursalam et al., 2024). At the same time, the analysis shows that identity is not represented as a fixed cultural label. It is performed through action and response: denying a mother, enduring injustice, acting from envy, or preventing a forbidden union. These actions position characters morally within a cultural worldview.

The cosmological dimension of the findings reinforces research that connects myth, place, and collective memory. Sudrajad et al. (2024) read the Tangkuban Prau legend as a reflection of customary law values, while Sukatman and Fitriyah (2024) show that myth-based toponymy can preserve cultural activity and memory. Karim et al. (2025) also demonstrate that local myth can sustain ecological and social worldviews. The present study adds that English versions can still maintain this symbolic universe when supernatural events are interpreted as representational devices rather than merely as fantasy elements.

The use of English is therefore important. English versions do not automatically erase local meaning, although retelling may involve mediation, simplification, or rearrangement. In the selected texts, core cultural structures remain visible: filial duty, domestic virtue, taboo, supernatural justice, and place-based memory. This finding is consistent with studies of cultural translation and adaptation that emphasize negotiation rather than simple transfer (Deng, 2024; Hendrawan & Kamayana, 2024; Lai & Zhao, 2025; Latranita et al., 2024; Mukminin et al., 2025; Setyawan et al., 2023). It also responds to concerns that cultural narratives may be flattened when they move into wider linguistic spaces (Baron et al., 2024; Robinson-Jones, 2024; Wejak, 2021).

The contribution of this study lies in its representational focus. Earlier studies have often treated folklore as a source of values, a teaching resource, or an object of translation analysis. This study brings those concerns together by examining how cultural values are constructed in

English narrative form. It shows that the cultural significance of folktales is located not only in themes such as obedience or kindness, but also in contrastive characterization, symbolic punishment, kinship conflict, taboo management, and etiological transformation.

The findings have practical implications for English-language and literature classrooms. If folktales are used only as examples of narrative-text structure, students may focus mainly on orientation, complication, and resolution. Such guidance is necessary because symbolic elements in folktales may be overlooked when narratives are approached only through literal plot reading (Pellicer, 2024). A representational approach can help teachers guide students to examine how plot structure carries cultural meaning. For example, students can discuss how a character's speech evaluates social status, how supernatural events function as moral signs, and how place names preserve collective memory. Such activities can support reading comprehension, cultural literacy, interpretive awareness, and critical appreciation of local identity in English-mediated texts.

Nevertheless, the study has a limited corpus and focuses only on three English versions from one public online source. Different retellings, translations, or regional-language versions may construct local wisdom differently. Therefore, the findings should be understood as an interpretive account of selected English texts rather than a comprehensive account of Indonesian folklore. Even with this limitation, the study demonstrates that close literary analysis can reveal how English versions of folktales continue to carry cultural identity through narrative form, symbolic language, and moral imagination.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how local wisdom and cultural identity are represented in selected English versions of Indonesian folktales, focusing on Malin Kundang, Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, and Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi. The analysis shows that local wisdom is constructed through three interrelated dimensions: moral causality, kinship and domestic obligation, and cosmology and mythic relation to place. In the selected texts, ethical values are embedded in narrative patterns that connect action with consequence, define family as a moral institution, and position human conduct within a broader symbolic order.

The study highlights that cultural identity in these texts is relational, moral, and symbolic. It is expressed through filial duty, domestic endurance, respect for kinship boundaries, supernatural justice, and the transformation of wrongdoing into visible memory. The findings also show that English can function as a medium of cultural mediation because the selected texts continue to preserve important elements of Indonesian cultural worldview. This contribution shifts attention from listing values to analyzing how those values are narratively constructed for wider audiences.

For translators, educators, and cultural practitioners, the findings suggest the importance of maintaining culturally grounded narrative elements when presenting Indonesian folklore in English. English versions should be evaluated not only for linguistic clarity, but also for the extent to which they retain relational ethics, symbolic objects, supernatural logic, and place-based memory.

The study is limited by its focus on three folktales from one online source. Future research should examine a larger corpus of English folktales from different regions of Indonesia and compare English versions with Indonesian or local-language versions. Such comparison would help clarify which cultural meanings are retained, shifted, explained, or omitted across languages.

AI DECLARATION USE

AI-assisted tools were used only to support language editing, formatting, and manuscript refinement. The authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and remain fully responsible for the accuracy, interpretation, and academic integrity of the work.

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