

Literature and Cultural Ecology: The Relationship Between Folklore and Environmental Sustainability

*Nordiana Ab Jabar**, *Suraya Sukri*, *Daeng Haliza Daeng Jamal*, *Sudirman Kiffli* and *Mohd Saipuddin Suliman*

Department of Heritage Studies, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, University of Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok, Kota Bharu, Kelantan

Abstract. The paper addresses the relationship between literature, cultural ecology, and folklore's role in promoting ecological sustainability. The expression of values and beliefs of community in folklore very often teaches people how to interact with the natural environment. This ecological component of folklore gives us a helpful insight into how traditional societies have grappled with and respected nature. This paper adopts a folkloric origin to identify several folk stories of ethnic groups in Malaysia to prove that these entertaining stories have essential messages on environmental conservation for the dwellers. Then, the article tells us how a literary treasure like this can be a pedagogical tool for raising ecological awareness and encouraging sustainable practices among the young generation. A more in-depth grasp of the literature on cultural ecology linking would lead to a better understanding of the role of image admin folklore in creating attitudes and perspectives towards environmental sustainability.

1 Introduction

For centuries, folklore has been accepted as one of the most viable media through which traditional knowledge and values can be translated into successive generations. It goes beyond storytelling in Malaysia because it is deeply connected to current natural issues and those surrounding sustainable practices. Folklore and environmental sustainability in Malaysia can be examined in the context of how conventional narratives and beliefs have and continue to influence the Malay cultural landscape. Malay literature, which includes manuscripts, epics, and poems, is a repository of knowledge that reflects an intimate understanding of the natural surroundings of the Malay community. Those elements of nature that are so close to the Malay cultural identity and way of life are immemorial [1] and are manifested in the symbolism of places, hidden life values, and the character of the environment.

However, folklore from Malaysia also plays a vital role in preserving and disseminating the traditional practices about the environment and its beliefs. Rituals and beliefs in folk stories have been found to directly reflect the lives and culture of the people when they are involved in economy, family, and resource management [2]. One of the things that are particularly noted and so is concern about these folkloric events would be efforts to save these rituals, which are considered to pass on knowledge and cultural wisdom to future generations [3, 4].

* Corresponding author: nordiana.aj@umk.edu.my

2 Literature review

In recent years, substantial research has been conducted on Malaysian folklore, with scholars examining almost every aspect of this multifaceted cultural phenomenon. However, the preservation and popularization of Malay folktales and legends have always been a pressing concern, for the love for these traditional sets of narratives is so speedily being destroyed [3, 5]. In one of the studies, rituals and beliefs, as represented in folktales collected from Mukim Bebar, Pekan, and Pahang, Malaysia [2], were studied. The authors then investigated qualitatively by interviewing local narrators and analyzing the community's functional relationship between life, culture, and folklore. Another research, 'Akal Budi dalam Cerita Rakyat Interpretasi Sosiobudaya Kanak-kanak dan Remaja,' has presented intellectual values and sociocultural interpretation in three selected folktales in Tanah Merah, Kelantan [6].

Other interactive multimedia applications, such as motion comics, have also been designed and developed to preserve and promote Malaysian folklore. These include the project entitled "Preserving and Promoting Malay Folklores and Legends Using Interactive Motion Comic: To find the most suitable folktale for conversion into an interactive comic format aimed at younger audiences and to increase understanding of these traditional narratives [5]. Beyond their content, some researchers have considered transcoding intangible heritage, such as the folklore stories of Malaysia, into audio-visual formats. The study "Transcoding Intangible Heritage: In 'The Folklore Stories of Malaysia' " examined challenges and strategies for conserving and broadcasting traditional tales through digital media.

3 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology to gather folklore narratives that help inform the research from primary and secondary data. Primary sources were interviews of traditional storytellers, elders, and cultural practitioners, while secondary sources were published folklore collections and academic and ethnographic studies. The document analysis approach was used to analyze the narratives collected for the survey thematically. First, to examine the recurrent motifs related to environmental conservation and sustainability and the moral and ethical teachings of the tales, it shall mainly concentrate on. In this regard, the analysis will systematically code the narratives, categorize them into patterns, and make the real meaning of these folk narratives on contemporary environmental issues. Eventually, this study will build upon how traditional stories can inform and inspire modern efforts toward sustainability.

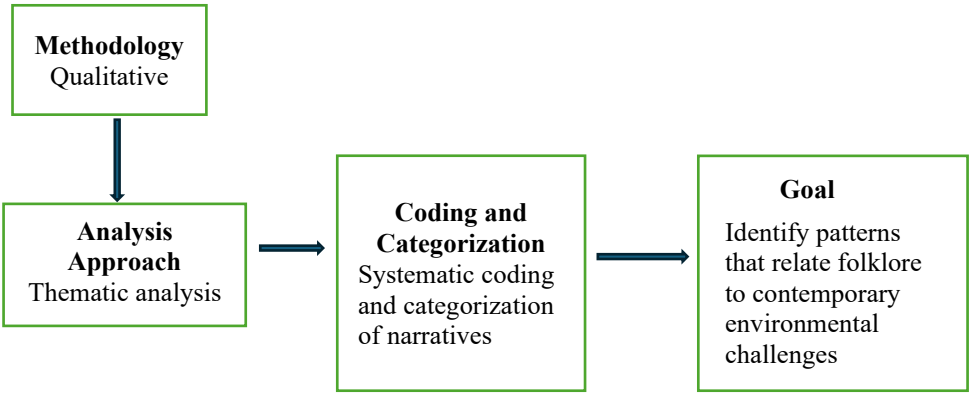


Fig. 1. Summary of qualitative methodology for analyzing folklore narratives.

4 Findings and Discussion

The words are not just written; they are a living fabric that links humans to the immediate natural ecosystems with which they are intimately inextricably interdependent, bound to each other and their places in the close-knit interdependent chain, from generation to generation. They tell stories, entertain, and help us understand Malay civilization’s cultural values and environmental perceptions. Environmental sustainability could not be promoted without Malaysian folklore that protected and promoted traditional ecological knowledge. Most Malaysian folktales and legends sources of inspiration are natural environs, local vegetation, faunistic sources, and traditional resource management. If we save and pass it on to the next generation, they might guide decision-making at the level of sustainability. This is taken from Bakhir et al. [5].

Second, folklore is a valuable mechanism for identifying a culture and strengthening community cohesiveness, an essential component of any environmental stewardship effort. Finally, people are much more inspired to take care of and protect the things that are in some ways familiar to them: natural environments and cultural history. Using Malaysian folklore to incorporate within educational systems and community-based projects will reinforce a resilient cultural pride and environmental responsibility.

Malaysia can tap into its intellectual resource of ancient wisdom, values, and stories, which folklore has the enduring power to be a scholarly resource of environmental sustainability. Thus, the use of Malaysian folklore in the sustainability program is a powerful and culturally ingrained way to preserve nature’s beauty and biodiversity, a part of the nation’s fabric, within the context of development with ecological conservation while identifying a balance between growth and environmental preservation

4.1 The curse of Langkawi: Mahsuri's heritage and environmental significance

The island of Langkawi, Malaysia's coast, has an influential legend about Mahsuri. Mahsuri was beautiful but virtuous, and despite her being falsely accused of adultery, she was sentenced to death. She cursed the island and died, cursing seven generations of misfortune to come. It has become the symbol of the price there can be for injustice and its link to integrity as it bends the arc of the earth’s resources and moral universe.

Langkawi’s image as a tourist destination is significant due to the legend of Mahsuri. Mahsuri’s story is one of the island’s considerable history and has become one of the 'Island of Legends.' or 'Mahsuri Legendary Island.' Mahsuri’s story has ended in Malaysia’s history textbooks and national memory. Aside from its cultural connotation, the legend of Mahsuri

has been taken and used as a metaphor for the environmental degradation and the consequent mismanagement, which taunted Langkawi not so long ago.

The relationship between the local myths and the island's natural landscape has been studied under the rubric of geom mythology [7]. Geom mythology may 'speak to the basis of some of the geological vocabulary of the island associated with local myths and folklore [7], providing information of vital importance to the island's environmental history and the attempts of communities to understand their environment [8].

Mahsuri legends warn us not to engage in ill quid pro quo actions, nor should we neglect our environment. As the island of Langkawi struggles with the problems of ecological and sustainable development, the Mahsuri legend has always carried a powerful symbolic meaning of justice, integrity, and the fundamental need for deep respect for the natural world [9, 10].

4.2 The legend of Naga Tasik Chini: Preserving ecological balance through mythical guardianship

Tasik Chini is a lake in Malaysia's Pahang state, representing the profound cultural heritage and environmental know-how encoded in local folklore. A legend around the lake says that the lake has a guardian dragon (naga) that will protect the ecosystem around the lake [11]. According to the Jakun people, the Indigenous community surrounds the lake, and a naga (dragon) lives near it. If the lake's natural balance is disturbed, it will awaken, bringing untold disaster [12].

This mythological narrative expresses the importance of ecological equilibrium and the sanctity of natural habitats. In line with the 'ecological wisdom' found elsewhere, the Tasik Chini dragon myth serves as an environmental deterrent to human acts that are unwarranted by the delicate lake ecosystem. Much like the Tenganan Pegringsingan community's 'natural fortress,' which protects the forest, the Tasik Chini naga legend is a cultural institution that protects the lake and its biodiversity.

Typically, the naga or dragon motif is present in the folklore and literature of many Tai-speaking Southeast Asian cultures [13]. Typically, these serpents are mythical serpents associated with a wealth of splendor and can transform her or himself. They are also worshipped as protectors of sacred sites and attendants of the Buddha and Bodhisattva. Its cultural heritage suggests that [the region's] people understood the natural world and that we should live with its mystical forces [14].

Hence, in the Tasik Chini dragon legend, it is a potent cultural deterrent for whoever is plotting to harm the lake and its life-sustaining ecosystem. The ardea mythical narrative is against the Jakun people's worldview, and so is about the ecological balance and respect for the specific habitat. Because the community is facing the challenge of rapid development and resource depletion, preserving this cultural legacy is increasingly essential to managing Tasik Chini sustainably.

4.3 The legend of Puteri Santubong: A Story of conflict, transformation, and environmental sustainability

The legend of a princess of Sarawak, Puteri Santubong, is the story of two sisters, Puteri Santubong and Puteri Sejinjang, who had to bring peace and prosperity to the land. Sadly, the battle between the two over a suitor resulted in a disastrous war, which left Puteri Santubong as Mount Santubong and Puteri Sejinjang as scattered islands [10, 11]. In its true meaning, this legendary narrative represents the discriminative effects of human conflict and the profound transformations of natural 'choreography' following it.

As an environmental sustainability course at its core, the Puteri Santubong Legend teaches the critical values of cooperation and harmony. The story never disappears from the Malay cultural and political environment; the narration from oral folklore to courtly texts to modern films testifies to the story's continued significance. The Puteri Gunung Ledang legend can be read similarly to the Puteri Santubong legend to legitimize the state and as a powerful allegory of the sensitive equilibrium of human actions and the natural world [10]. It could be saved if communities can hang onto the ecological wisdom inherent in these mythic narratives. If they do this, then they will develop a greater understanding of their environment and where they need to be to coexist with it.

4.4 The Supernatural Phenomenon of Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup: A Cautionary Tale

Walk along any of Malaysia's beautiful landscapes dotted with a spectacular number of natural wonders, and you will be captivated by its charm and the hearts of Malaysians and tourists alike. Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup is one such marvel and has been the people's fascination for a long time.

The Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup is a natural formation set in the quiet countryside and appears to be two flat rocks clinging together against gravity and physics [15]. This awe-inspiring sight has been the subject of countless legends and folklore, and the local communities have imbued the site with a great spiritual significance. The itinerant extraordinary resonates well with the rest of Malaysia's rich cultural tapestry, which creatively blurs the lines between the natural world and the supernatural.

As an alternative to the sustainable development of natural attractions such as Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup [16], ecotourism, a responsible approach towards travel that preserves the environment and benefits the local community, has been proposed. Ecotourism can enhance the appreciation of Malaysia's natural and cultural heritage by sharing captivating stories and conserving the site's cultural significance while providing economic opportunities to the local populace.

But it's a careful intertwining of protecting and advancing these sacred sites as a destination. These natural wonders are not merely the objects of reverence for local communities that have been the custodians of these natural wonders for so long; missteps in developing ecotourism could wreck the fragile balance.

The more the world becomes interconnected, the more these magical places will lure in a growing number of visitors, the threat to the origin of the Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup [16]. In any ecotourism initiative, the local communities' environment and cultural integrity must be protected, and awe-inspiring natural formations and their timeless legends must be protected for future generations.

The Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup is a cautionary tale; it reminds us that we should first preserve our natural and cultural heritage when responsibly sharing our marvels with the world. Through social form conservation and responsible tourism, we can strike this delicate balance by conserving the supernatural phenomenon of Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup (Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup), a testament to the enduring human-natural relations (17, 18).

Table 1. The respective Malaysian states (negeri) where these folklore stories originate

Folklore Title	Summary	Ecological Theme	Moral/Ecological Lesson	State
Legend of Mahsuri	A beautiful woman falsely accused of adultery curses Langkawi with seven generations of misfortune.	Consequences of wrongful actions	Importance of justice and integrity in resource management	Kedah
Tale of Naga Tasik Chini	A dragon guards Tasik Chini and punishes those who disturb the lake's natural balance.	Maintaining ecological balance	Respect for natural habitats	Pahang
Legend of Puteri Santubong	Two sisters tasked with bringing peace fall into conflict, resulting in their transformation into natural landmarks.	Human conflict and environmental transformation	Cooperation and harmony for sustainability	Sarawak
Tale of Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup	A grieving mother is swallowed by a rock formation with supernatural properties, leaving her children behind.	Environmental neglect and impact of despair	Resilience and care for environment and social well-being	Selangor

6 Conclusion

Embedded into environmental sustainability efforts, integrating folklore into cultural preservation efforts is a powerful way to 'do good.' We learn valuable lessons of traditional ecological wisdom, which has sustained communities for decades, from the timeless narratives of Mahsuri, Naga Tasik Chini, Puteri Santubong, and Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup. These beings that hold these morals and ethical ways the stories of these beings are essential to nature's integrity, balance, and harmony. These folkloric works will be integrated into the school curriculum and community projects to strengthen a culture of pride in the country's natural beauty and biodiversity while helping to keep the country's beauty and biodiversity for future generations.

References

1. M. Hussain, M.Y.M. Yunus, N.A. Ismail, N.F.M. Ariffin, S. A. Ismail, Review of the elements of nature and the Malay cultural landscape through Malay literature. *Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute* **12**, 6, 2154-2154 (2020)
2. S. Hanipah, R. Abdullah, M. Karim, Rituals and beliefs embedded in Mukim Bebar folktales. *Folklore Journal of Malaysia* **29**, 4, 89-102 (2021)
3. N. Fairuz and S. Ng, The decline of traditional narratives: The impact of Western media and technology. *Asian Folklore Studies* **36**, 2, 112-128 (2018)
4. R. Santano, Transcoding intangible heritage: The folklore stories of Malaysia. *Digital Heritage Journal* **15**, 2, 134-150 (2017)
5. A. Z. Bakhir, N.A. Rahim, S. Ali, Preserving and promoting Malay folklore and legends using interactive motion comic: The Fang King. *Journal of Interactive Media* **12**, 3, 45-59 (2018)
6. S. Adnan, Y. Yaacob, Akal budi dalam cerita rakyat: Interpretasi sosiobudaya kanak-kanak dan remaja. *Jurnal Sastera Kanak-kanak*, **5**, 1, 67-82 (2023).
7. T. Unjah, S.A. Halim, Connecting Legend and Science through Geom mythology: Case of Langkawi UNESCO Global Geopark. *University of Science Malaysia* **35**, 77-89 (2017)
8. R. Hashim, Z. A. Latif, F. M. Merican and N. N. Zamhury, The Praxis of Langkawi's sustainable regeneration strategy through eco-tourism. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* **170**, 49-57 (2015)
9. M. F. M Yusof, H. N. Ismail and R. N. R. Omar, A Critical Analysis on Evolution of Branding Destination in Langkawi Island. (EDP Sciences, 2014)
10. M. Hijjas, 'The Legend You Thought You Knew': Text and Screen Representations of Puteri Gunung Ledang. *Taylor & Francis* **18**, 2, 245-270 (2010)
11. I. G. N. A. K. Aditya, I. G. K. G. Arsana, I. N. Suarsana, Nilai Kearifan Ekologis dalam Mitos Lelipi Selahan Bukit Bagi Masyarakat Desa Tenganan Pegriingsingan Kabupaten Karangasem Bali. *Udayana University*, **22**, 1, 81-81 (2018)
12. A. Habibah, J. Hamzah, I. Mushrifah, Sustainable Livelihood of the Community in Tasik Chini Biosphere Reserve: The Local Practices. *Canadian Center of Science and Education* **3**, 3 (2010)
13. P. Nimmanahaeminda, Water Lore: Thai-Tai Folk Beliefs and Literature. *Manusya: Journal of Humanities* **8**, 3, 27-39 (2005).
14. E. R. Eslit, Use of Mythical Creatures in Folk Literature of Southeast Asia: A Comparative analysis. *IJRAEL: International Journal of Religion Education and Law* **2**, 2, 89-96 (2023)
15. N. Nofiarli, The development of ecotourism model at natural attractions of Tete Batu Village in East Lombok. *Sumatra Journal of Disaster, Geography and Geography Education* **2**, 1, 184-90 (2018)
16. S. Hitchner, P. Bala, Traversing sacred stones in the heart of Borneo: transboundary ecotourism through the megalithic landscapes of the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak, Malaysia and the Kerayan Highlands of Kalimantan, Indonesia. *Journal of Borneo-Kalimantan* **6**, 2, 84-97 (2020).

17. R. A. Aziz, O. P. Liu, S. Aziz, S. A. Halim. Introduction: Continuing Legacies: Engaging Custodians in Heritage Conservation. *Kajian Malaysia* **35**, 1-10 (2017)
18. N. J. Azhari, A. A. Razak, M. S. M. Noor, M. M. M. Aris, Assessing Sustainable Tourism in Kuala Kubu Bharu: A Qualitative Approach. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* **13**, 5, 2309-2326 (2023).