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WRTG 3030 – Topics in Writing on Science & Society

27th February 2024

**Assessing the Sustainability of Folklores in Malaysia in the 21st Century**

Knowledge. Two definitions can be used for this aspect of life, and these two definitions somewhat contradict each other. According to Oxford Languages, knowledge is facts, information and skills acquired by a person through experience or education or an awareness or familiarity gained by experience of a fact or situation. From the subject Theory of Knowledge (TOK), knowledge is something either someone or a group of people, produced on their own or together to explain different concepts of life. The Oxford definition constricts knowledge to only facts, which by definition, must be accompanied by evidence; meanwhile the TOK definition opens the gate to various types of areas of knowledge, ranging from facts to illogical things such as myths and legends. But, both definitions serve the same purpose; to teach about life. In this writing, the area of knowledge that we will be focusing on is the indigenous knowledge system, specifically in the country of Malaysia with folktales as the medium to pass down the knowledge. By looking at Malaysian folktales, we can see the theme that these folktales want to portray to the audience, which is to teach about crucial, good personality traits that could pose serious damage to society if neglected. This is important because often the audience – people of this day and age – gets distracted by the story’s fantasy and magical aspects, which are only used to ‘flavor’ the story due to the ‘domestication’ of these folktales by the entertainment industry. To unpack and discuss this topic, this writing will first discuss the indigenous knowledge system and the concept of folktales. then, this continues to how folktales become a part of the culture and the evolving society, thus questioning the credibility of these folktales in this day and age. Three Malaysian folktales, Si Tanggang, Puteri Gunung Ledang and Ulek Mayang, will be used as examples to discuss the value of folktales in the old times compared to modern times. Lastly, we will analyze the current dire state that these folktales are facing now and what can be done to preserve them. As Marcus Garvey once said – “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin or culture is like a tree without roots.”

**Literature Review**

The area of my research is to study the credibility of folktales in modern times because of the declining presence of folktales among the modern Malaysian community, especially Malaysian youths. By looking at Malaysian folktales, we can see the theme that these folktales want to portray to the audience, which is to teach about crucial, good personality traits that could pose serious damage to society and self if neglected. This is important because often the audience gets distracted by the story's fantasy and magical aspects, which are only used to ‘flavor’ the story. To further support my research, I will be reviewing some articles and papers of others that might prove useful for my research.

The first paper is by Halima I. Amali about the function of folktales as a process of educating children in the 21st century using Idoma folktales as an example. The author delves into the different types of folktale stories and how all these folktales are good for children’s education. In the paper, the author used an Idoma moral tale as an example. In this Idoma moral tale, a stepmother plans to get rid of her stepson by sending him on a dangerous errand to a place where nobody returns alive. However, along the way, the boy encounters spirits who sympathize with him and help him complete the task. They also grant him magical powers to teach his stepmother a lesson. When he returns, he breaks the pot of water, which unleashes a swarm of snakes that fatally bite the stepmother. The story teaches the importance of kindness over wickedness, love for one another, the consequences of evil acts, and the idea that innocence often finds protection in times of danger.Top of FormBottom of Form With the examples provided by the author, this paper provides a view from the educational perspective and how it benefits children, who are also the main audience of folktales.

The second resource is an article by Grace Wee with the title ‘‘Folktales and fairy tales have no place in the modern world.’ How far do you agree?’. This article also discussed the issue of the credibility of folktales by asking how can folktales find new appreciation in the demands of the new age society. The question asked by the writer provides me with other possibilities on how can folktales be saved from extinction because ultimately, it is the society itself that decides whether an aspect of that culture survives or not. With this, I will be able to find new ideas on how to embed the culture of folktales into the system of modern society in Malaysia.

The third resource is also an article, written by Clara Malzer entitled ‘The Wisdom of Myth and Folklore: Why We Need Stories to Keep Us Alive as a Society’. In this paper, the writer successfully establishes the connection between folktales and oneself. The reason is that the folktales are made based on how the society at that time operates and the essence of that society remains after tens and hundreds and even thousands of years. We may not realize it but deep down, these folktales reconnect us to our true selves. This article helps me in strengthening the claim that folktales are very important to the community and ourselves individually.

The last resource that I will be reviewing is a paper written by R. O. Winstedt with the title ‘Nature in Malay Literature and Folk Verse’. The writer explains that Malay pieces of literature including folktales are very intricate and have a really beautiful relationship with nature itself. The writer mainly focuses on pantun which is the form of traditional Malay poetry. Even though the writer did not use folktales as his reference, Malaysian folktales usually use pantun to tell the story. Folktales in Malaysia are not just ordinary storytelling. Folklorists or us Malaysians call them *penglipurlara*, mainly use pantun to attract the audience’s attention and to convey the feelings of the characters and the aura of the tale. This paper by R. O. Winstedt lays down another useful perspective to look from, which is to preserve the art of Malay works of literature including folktales.

In conclusion, all these authors have one common approach to the problem, which is to view from every perspective possible, be it individually, as a community, or from the artistic perspective. These works are very eye-opening for me, thus giving me more ideas on how to approach the problem I stated before. To help me in writing this paper also, I included the International Baccalaureate page on the subject of Theory of Knowledge, specifically about the Indigenous Knowledge System because these folktales are a vital asset of knowledge to humans aside from the scientific knowledge we all care about in this 21st century.

**What are folktales?**

According to the Oxford Dictionary, folktales are stories originating in popular culture, typically passed around by word of mouth. Folktales are also considered to be a method or an agent of the Indigenous Knowledge System. Local knowledge that is unique to a particular culture or society is explored in this knowledge system and usually refers to the knowledge constructed by a particular group of people such as the Namaqua people of Southern Africa, the Secoya people of Ecuador and Peru, the Ryukyuan people of Japan and the Wopkaimin people of Papua New Guinea. In this paper, the group of people that we will be focusing on are the Malay people of Malaysia. An important aspect of indigenous knowledge systems is that they are dynamic where both internal and external influences are blended to create the Malay society of that time. The Malay knowledge system today, for example, is a mixture of traditional knowledge and knowledge inherited over time from exposure to the Hindu culture before the Islamic age of Malaysia (back then known as Tanah Melayu, *The Land of Malay*).

Folktales often overlap with other terms such as myths and legends, and these overlapping definitions are very vague and considered to go hand-in-hand with one another. Myths are ‘traditional stories, especially ones concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events’ according to Oxford while legends are ‘traditional stories sometimes popularly regarded as historical but unauthenticated’. By assessing the definitions of folktales, myths and legends, we can see that all three terms are traditional stories but with different values. Folktales are passed around by mouth, myths are stories to explain some natural or social phenomenon and legends are stories that are historical but unauthenticated. These are all related and important for readers to know that even myths and legends are also considered folktales and we will see these terms being used to identify the examples that will be discussed in this paper.

**Folktales in Malaysian culture**

Malaysia in the 21st century is a melting pot of cultures (Malay, Chinese and Indian) and religions (Islam, Christian, Hindu, Buddha, etc.). This is due to the immigration of the Chinese and Indian during the age when Malaysia was conquered by the British after World War I. This is very different from the Malaysia of the old age, called Tanah Melayu, where animism was the core belief of the people at that time, even before the spread of Islam in the 18th and 19th centuries. As stated before, the people of this age adopted the animism belief. Animism is the belief in supernatural power in nature and inanimate objects, particularly nature, and this belief can still be observed in Malaysian folktales, where curses and ghosts are prominent. Folktales in Malaysia stems from a mixture of animist beliefs and moral values, and these folktales are very unique from other cultures in the way how these moral values are conveyed to the audience, mainly children. The stories often do not have a nice ending where the main character lives happily ever after and moral values are extracted from the kind and good deeds done by the character. Instead, the stories tap into the reality of being a human, commonly greed and pride. The main character will either die or be cursed to a miserable life. This way the stories deliver a stronger impact on the audience, especially the children.

With the evolving society of Malay in the modern age, folktales have become less prominent in Malay households. There are better stories and materials that children can learn from that are less scary and have more interesting characters such as superheroes instead of the supernatural and absurd stories of folktales that people often label as ghost stories. Children would absolutely prefer to listen to stories of warriors, princesses and superheroes and idolize those characters. They can just search for the stories they like on the Internet while there is not much exposure to folktale stories to children. Often folktales are only told by their grandparents and considered by children as ghost stories because of the supernatural powers and entities that are commonly used in folktales. Because of this, folktales are being forgotten by the current generation and only the truly fortunate people are lucky enough to spectate these folktales audially. To help the readers understand what kind of folktales the Malay culture has in store, we will be analyzing three different folktale stories from various perspectives on the sustainability of folktales in the Malay culture in the 21st century.

**Si Tanggang**

Si Tanggang is a story about a child being disobedient to his parents after achieving great things in life. The story starts with a poor family in a village. The family consists of a mother, a father and a son but in some variations, the father has already passed before the birth of the son. The son, Si Tanggang, is the protagonist and later antagonist of the story, and the mother, Si Deruma or Mak Umpit (different names in different versions of the story), is also the main character of the story. During the childhood of Si Tanggang, the family lives from hand to mouth. One day, while Mak Umpit is sweeping leaves in front of the house, Si Tanggang ponders as to why are they so poor and states that he is jealous of other families eating better and wishing a better life than they are living right now. He also said that he wants to work hard and improve the family circumstances with mentions of putting a diamond necklace on his mother, but to do this, he has to venture out of the village for a long time and will return in the future. This touched Mak Umpit’s feelings. She admires her son’s dream to help his mother but does not want her only son to be away from her. In the end, she became reluctant and said,” If that is what makes you happy my dear son, then go and achieve your dream”. Thus, Si Tanggang went to a nearby harbor and was accepted to work as a ship crew on a rich merchant’s ship.

Si Tanggang displayed impressive business skills and impressed the merchant. His hard work while aboard the ship and dedication to the merchant pay off as he is trusted by the merchant and is offered to marry the merchant’s daughter. When the merchant reached old age, he entrusted his ship and his business to Si Tanggang, making Si Tanggang’s dream come true to be rich and successful after years of work. On a fateful day, his ship arrived at a harbor, the very same harbor where he started his journey. People soon learn the captain and owner of the docked ship is Si Tanggang, and soon the name reaches the mouth of the people in the village where Mak Umpit is. Mak Umpit has been very sad since the departure of her beloved son, disconnecting herself from society. When the news of Si Tanggang arrived with the villagers’ help, she said, “Oh my beloved son has finally arrived to see his mother. Why did you not relay this news earlier? My son must be missing his mother and eager to eat his mother’s food”. Mak Umpit then went to the harbor with the excitement and joy that a mother would have after not getting to embrace her only son for so many years. Instead, reality betrays the mother.

Mak Umpit arrived but was thrown off the ship. She called out her beloved son’s name, Si Tanggang, repeatedly with sadness and agony in her voice, not being able to see her son. Si Tanggang came out and looked down the ship, only to see his old mother in ragged clothes, crying out his name. Mak Umpit’s tear of sadness turns into tears of relief after seeing her son’s face. However, the mother’s feelings does not reciprocate with the son’s. Si Tanggang felt utterly disgusted and shameful when his name was uttered by a disgusting, poor old woman. He said, “I have no mother that is as disgusting and poor as this. Begone. I am from a rich family and honorable lineage”. Si Tanggang then instructed his ship to dock out of the harbor immediately after being shamed in front of his wife and ship crew. Mak Umpit, despite being very sad that her son abandoned her, prays to God, “O Lord The Almighty, punish my son for abandoning the mother who gave birth to him, the mother who feeds him, the mother who loves him all this time”. Soon, the sea suddenly became aggressive, winds howling and thunders roaring. Si Tanggang realized his mother cursed him and shouted for his mother’s forgiveness but it was already too late. The ship, the crew, the belongings and Si Tanggang’s wife all turned to stone amid the storm. Si Tanggang then was turned into a crow for the rest of his life.

This story is a very popular folktale that often a mother would tell her son to not be a disobedient child or *anak derhaka*. The most prominent moral value that could be extracted from this story is to never abandon your family when you have achieved great things in life. This is a very impactful story for a young kid because kids are very afraid of death, thus making children more obedient to their parents. Children will also be more grateful for their parents because often kids would think that their parents are lame and playing with their friends looks cool. As we stated before, curses are very prominent in Malaysian folktales and we could see that the prayer recited by Mak Umpit is a curse. This story is a folktale that is very closely labeled as a myth because the part where Si Tanggang was turned into a crow explains the sounds made by crows when they caw, which sounds like “mak”, which means mother in Malay. This story had been a staple in every Malay household but has been diminished among the recent generations. Perhaps the educational style of the parents of this day and age adopted is different than before, but the tale of Si Tanggang should be instilled in the very being of people of this generation.

**Puteri Gunung Ledang**

This folktale is a tale of love between a king and a princess. Although it is considered as a love tale, it is more of an unrequited love between a king and a princess. The protagonist of this story is a sultan of the Melaka Sultanate, Sultan Mahmud Shah, who also ruled during the same era as the most famous Malay warrior of all time, Admiral Hang Tuah. One day, the sultan heard of a very beautiful princess who resides on a mountain far from the kingdom of Malacca, which is Mount Ledang (Gunung Ledang in Malay). So, Sultan Mahmud Shah decides to marry the princess because of her renown as the most beautiful lady in the whole Tanah Melayu. The sultan held a meeting with all his advisors and stated his desire to make the princess of Mount Ledang his queen. Everyone in the meeting was shocked to hear the sultan and even the lead advisor, Datuk Bendahara, who is considered to be very wise, did not even dare to speak up because it would invoke the sultan’s wrath and it is sure to end badly. The sultan decided to enlist three advisors of his to court the Princess of Mount Ledang. The three advisors are Datuk Sang Setia, Tun Mamat, and the famous Admiral Hang Tuah. Even though Hang Tuah is very old, he still went on the expedition.

When the expedition team reached the foot of Mount Ledang, the villagers there did not want to help the entourage from Malacca because they did not know where to find the princess on the mountain themselves. Hearing the news, the group searched for the princess’s palace on the mountain. Despite not having any clue as to where the palace is located, Admiral Hang Tuah urged them to continue their search because the sultan would be angered if they did not even meet the princess. After a few days of searching, Hang Tuah decided to drop out of the expedition and wait at the foot of the mountain with Datuk Sang Setia because of old age. Tun Mamat was left to lead the entourage and on a fateful day, they found their way to the palace. It was said that the pillars of the palace were made of bones, unidentified to be either animal or human bones. The roof of the palace looked like it was made of hair. This gave Tun Mamat goosebumps. Out of thin air, young beautiful maidens suddenly surrounded the entourage and inquired as to why an entourage from the Melaka Sultanate was at the palace of Mount Ledang. As Tun Mamat answered that Sultan Mahmud Shah wants to marry the princess, a *nenek kebayan* (Malay version of fairy godmother or witch) appeared and asked the same thing. Upon receving the same answer from Tun Mamat, the *nenek kebayan* then went back into the palace to relay the message back to the princess. She then came back with a proposal from the princess, namely a golden bridge from Mount Ledang to Malacca, a silver bridge from Malacca to Mount Ledang, 7 trays filled with mosquito hearts, 7 trays filled with moth hearts, 7 jars filled with virgin tears, 7 jars of young betel nut waters, a bowl of the blood of Raja Muda (title for a prince and heir to the throne of the Melaka Sultanate).

Upon receiving the absurd proposals from the princess, Tun Mamat descends and meets up with Hang Tuah and Datuk Sang Setia. He told them of the princess’s proposals despite him not being able to talk directly to the princess but Hang Tuah said that the *nenek kebayan* was actually the princess in disguise. Tun Mamat then responded by saying that if he knew the *nenek kebayan* was the princess herself, he would have kidnap and bring her back to the sultan. The entourage then journeys back to Malacca and informs the sultan of the princess’s proposal. From this part, there are two variations of the story. A version of the story stated that the sultan was able to fulfill six of the seven proposals except for the request of the Raja Muda’s blood. Another version stated that the sultan did not even fulfill any of the seven proposals because he did not want to sacrifice his son just to marry a princess that was not even sure to exist. Sultan Mahmud Shah then decided to ignore the Princess of Mount Ledang entirely and did not mention the name ever since then.

The moral of this folktale is to be rational and not be blinded by the wealth and beauty the world has to offer. Often the greatest things in life require the greatest sacrifice and in this case, to marry someone of such great renown requires the sultan to sacrifice his son. This folktale then proceeds to be a legend of Mount Ledang because of the mystical aspect of the story. It was said that the princess is *orang bunian* (elven people or directly translated as hidden people) and the belief of the existence of *orang bunian* still holds to this day among villagers. Old people would always tell everyone to be respectful in forests, jungles and even at the sea because these places were said to house *orang bunian*. Angering them will make them haunt you until you pay back the respect required by the *orang bunian*. Even though this is not the core belief of Malay nowadays, this belief helps the community in preserving the forests and jungles in Malaysia. This prevents people from littering and desecrating forests with urine and feces. All in all, the tale of Puteri Gunung Ledang does have positive impacts and shows that a folktale can help protect nature.

**Ulek Mayang**

This final example is considered one of the most famous and notorious folktales in Malaysia. Upon reciting the true song of the folktale, people could get possessed by spirits summoned by the song. The tale is about a group of fishermen venturing out to sea and their encounter with the *orang bunian* in the sea. It was said that an *orang bunian*, claiming to be the sixth of the seven princesses of the sea, suddenly appeared and wanted to marry one of the fishermen because she was captivated by him. That particular fisherman politely rejected the offer because the common belief is to avoid any business with *orang bunian* because it never ends with a good ending. The *orang bunian* was enraged by the rejection and decided to crash the fishermen’s boat with waves, thus throwing the fishermen into the water and leaving them to their demise. The fishermen then were found stranded at the shore and noticed one of them was not waking up despite not being dead. The group brought the guy to meet with the local shaman for help. The shaman deduced that the guy’s spirit had been abducted by the *orang bunian* during the storm and the only way to retrieve it was to ask the *orang bunian*.

The shaman conducted a ritual and he summoned the same princess and asked for the spirit to be given back, only for the princess to retaliate and fight him. The fight goes on and the princess tells the shaman to summon her sister, the fourth princess to come and ask her. The same thing happened and the shaman summoned the second princess. Finally, he summoned the first and the eldest princess, who is also the strongest and the wisest of the princesses. The eldest princess then stopped the fight and instructed her sisters to go back and return the spirit of the guy they took. The eldest princess then uttered the famous words, “*Aku tahu asal usulmu. Biarkan yang laut pulang ke laut, dan yang darat pulang ke darat*”. If translated, “I know where you come from. Let the ones from the sea return to the sea, and the ones from the land return to the land”.

To express their gratitude for giving back the guy’s spirit, the shaman held a ritual where he offered *pulut kuning* (Malaysian steamed turmeric glutinous rice) and sang the Ulek Mayang song to summon the princesses. As mentioned before, the song above is the revised version and the invocation does not include invoking the odd-numbered princesses except for the seventh (the eldest) because it was said that those princesses are stronger and more vicious than the even-numbered princesses. This ritual has been practiced ever since until Islam arrived and abolished animism practice in Tanah Melayu. Since then, the ritual of Ulek Mayang has only been performed as a cultural performance and nothing more. This folktale does not have an explicit moral value that can be extracted for children but this kind of story was used to warn children to not play near the beach, especially when high tide or a storm is happening. This folktale is also one of the only folktales that have a song, and this song is a traditional Malay song called ‘syair’. This traditional art is also diminishing in the modern Malaysian community because people nowadays are sure to prefer songs by Taylor Swift and K-Pop artists instead of listening to a ritual song that could possess you.

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