

Tales of Crocodiles from Nusantara: The Sacred Stories of the River Folklore

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Abstract

This paper explores the menacing reputation of reptiles in oral traditions and focuses on famous crocodile-related stories in Malaysia and neighbouring regions. It aims to analyze these tales from a sacred perspective, as beliefs about these creatures impact communities. The paper addresses how these narratives influence people's perceptions and beliefs about crocodiles. Data is sourced from specialized websites, and sacred concepts introduced by scholars are applied to analyze the stories. This research delves into the cultural significance of these stories, shedding light on their role in shaping attitudes towards these formidable reptiles.

Keywords: Crocodiles, Folklore, Literature, Sacred

1. Introduction

Every community has their own artistic or cultural heritage, which is the pride of every generation. The cultural or artistic heritage has been a symbol and image of the community for a long time. Even such a legacy is also a form of identification or trademark of the community throughout other communities. The heritage of *Kuda kepang* dance has become a trademark for people of Javanese descent, whether in Malaysia or Indonesia. The heritage of *Labu Sayong* craft has become an identity marker for the community in Kuala Kangsar. *Mak Yong* and *Dikir Barat* also became the pride of generations of people in Kelantan and many more relevant examples.

One of the cultural and artistic heritage that becomes the identity and pride of the owner is the folklore heritage. Folklore taken from the English word folklore is a form of vast heritage covering a variety of arts and cultures under it. A well-known figure who talks a lot about folklore is Alan Dundes through his famous book *Introduction to Folklore* (1965), while the figure in the archipelago is James Danandjaja through his writings *Indonesian Folklore: Gossip Science, Fairy Tales and Others* (1992).

In a nutshell, 'folk' refers to a specific group of people who share the same way of life, while 'lore' refers to the cultural heritage or art owned by the community exclusively. It can be identified as the inheritance is an absolute, distinct and memorable right to the particular community only. Such inheritance does not require any recognition from other groups of society. Moreover, the community who inherited such a legacy had agreed collectively that they would share among themselves without individual ownership. For example, the *Kuda kepang* dance can be played and performed by anyone capable in the community without obtaining permission from any individual first. This unique property has been discussed precisely by James Danandjaja (1992) and Dundes (1965).

Folklore has an endorsement in the form of a 'big umbrella', which is the patron of various 'lore' or cultural heritage under it. There are a few elements of folklore, including the following:

- Folk Performance
- Folk Dance
- Folk Songs
- Folk Craft
- Folk Medicine
- Folk Believed

- Folk Costume
- Folk Cuisine
- Folk Games
- Folk Poetry
- Folk Tales

This article contains three main objectives to study. The first objective is to highlight the oral stories about crocodiles that are still the concern of the community since the days until now. Second objective was to compare oral stories about crocodiles found in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Each story has its own similarities and differences.

The last objective is to study the relationship of these crocodile stories with sacred elements. This article will show how the oral story contains elements of belief, mysticism and also certain peculiarities that are able to make the story continue to remain in people's memory and also give birth to high public respect for the crocodile story.

There are several studies have been done before. However, the studies did not focus on river folklore and crocodiles. Regardless, the studies focused on animal fables only. For example, Greta Ariati Mulyosantoso and Chrisdina Wempi (2020) has discuss regarding traditional fable folklore that been adapt inform of circus. Furthermore, 'The Fabulous Fable Show; Circus and Theatre' is a concept that was born out of passion for the archipelago's native culture, combining circus acts with other performing arts forms.

Atisah (2021) discuss fable folklore involve deer in children story. The animal tale or fable "A Mouse Deer Who Always Remembers God" is the subject of this study's religious analysis. The work is being analysed using the descriptive analysis approach and an objective theory that is based on the work itself. The deer figure in the fable is well-known for being intelligent and adept at solving puzzles.

Consequently, this article showcases a novelty that emphasizes crocodile in particular nation of Nusantara. The study of crocodile tales will shed light on several topics, including conventional wisdom, human-animal relationships, and human interaction with the natural world. Further, one of the more intriguing aspects of river folklore and literature is the prevalence of supernatural themes in crocodile legends even in modern times.

2. What is a River Folklore?

It is challenging to determine whether 'River folklore' is an exceptional concept or just an expression to refer to the existence of an element of folklore in the river or related to the river. In my view, 'river folklore' is not a form of concept, theory, or specific characteristics in the field of folklore. There are few readings of folklore written by famous figures in this field, and no specific concept or theory about River Folklore has been found.

However, several articles on portals and websites discuss and provide general explanations about the folklore of the river. Among them, they associated the folklore of the river with the existence of myths of belief in certain gods who dominate the river in several locations in this world, such as in Ancient Greece (see portal icysedwick.com). This portal also references River Gods as well as Dark spirits who control major rivers in certain countries.

Nevertheless, there is an exciting view of the river folklore by Dee Dee Chainey and Willow Winsham (see portal folklorethursday.com). They both refer to river folklore as:

Folklore of the seas and rivers has a resonance in cultures all over the world. Watery **hopes, fears** and **dreams** are shared by all people where rivers flow and waves crash.

Dee Dee Chainey and Willow Winsham's view is fascinating and easier to understand because they associate the folklore of the river with 'hope', 'fear' and 'dream'.

If this view is refined, it is pretty accurate because we have heard about certain communities who consider the river sacred and bring good luck, such as the Ganges River in India. There is also a belief in this archipelago that practices traditional medicine by using river water. Even more interesting, there is also a view that considers the river a location of danger, horror and death because of river-dwelling creatures that can kill humans, such as the legends of crocodiles that are violent and famous based on certain community beliefs.

As an initial review in this paper, it can be said that the folklore of the river has a close relationship with the sacred elements that form the core of a community's traditional beliefs. Although the specific discussion of river folklore is not found in the writing of famous folklore figures, the river folklore is still linked back to the existing fractions and types of folklore, namely community beliefs (folk beliefs), traditional medicine (folk medicine),

legendary stories/myths (folk tales), etc.

3. Crocodile Stories as River Folklore

As we know, the river folklore's focus can be associated with various heritage and traditions of the community, but this paper only focuses on crocodile stories as one of the elements of river folklore. Stories or legends related to crocodiles in the archipelago are quite a lot; some of them are very famous and known by the general public. The crocodile legend is not an oral story that is far from the community because, in addition to being easily found in written form, crocodile stories have also been filmed, especially in Indonesia, Thailand and Western countries. For example, the Legend of the White Crocodile was filmed in Indonesia in the 1980s under the title "Buaya Putih" and "*Ratu Buaya Putih*". Western countries have also produced films such as "Alligator" (1980 and 1991), "Lake Placid" (1999), "Crawl" (2019) and several other titles that indirectly show the story of this crocodile is very interesting and able to attract viewers.

Therefore, the stories about crocodiles that represent the folklore of the river are very appropriate to be studied in more depth to show their uniqueness and importance. In the context of oral stories, several crocodile legends are very well known and often rewritten repeatedly in several portals and websites. Such as:

i) Legend of the Chalawan crocodile king in Thailand

This legend is famous around the area of Pichit province, northern Thailand. The crocodile king was known as Chalawan. Chalawan lives in a cave. The cave inhabited by the Chalawan has its own wonders and magic power. Any crocodile that enters the cave can turn into a human and anything according to their own will. Eventually, Chalawan became violent and started eating humans around the River area. One day, Chalawan swam to the river's edge and saw a beautiful girl. Chalawan does not kill the girl but instead captures and takes her into the cave. Chalawan turns into a human in the cave and wants to marry the girl. The girl's father felt that his daughter was dead. He hired several men to find his daughter's body and kill the crocodile, but all attempts failed. Finally came a man named Khai Tong. He hunts Chalawan by using spells, which are Chalawan spells, to make Chalawan appear and fight with him. Chalawan was seriously injured and swam back into the cave. Khai Tong followed into the cave and managed to kill the crocodile, and the girl was saved.

(Source: Summary from the portal <http://worldtourism.com/chalawan-thailand-fearsome-crocodile> King and also <https://theculturetrip.com/asia>)

ii) Crocodile story of South Sulawesi

A mother in Suli Village, Kabupaten Luwu, is grieving after her son's death. One day, a small crocodile appeared in front of her house. The crocodile is as enormous as an adult's foot and moves fragiley. The crocodile moved very similar to how his son used to move during his disabled life. So, the mother and villagers around her believed that the little crocodile was her son's twin. In addition, in the village Cekerang Kabupaten Luwu, there is a similar story in which an enormous crocodile has a pair of twins with one of the villagers. As a result, the people there always use the river despite the many crocodiles because they also believe the crocodiles are their friends and relatives. There are records that the people there always give 'offerings' or entertain the crocodiles in the river as a symbol of good relations between humans and crocodiles.

(Source: Summary from the portal Eko Rusdianto.2015. "Legenda Buaya di Kalangan Masyarakat Sulawesi Selatan" <https://historia.id/cultur/articles>)

iii) The Legend of Bujang Senang in Sarawak

There are several versions of the legend about this famous crocodile in Sarawak. One version displays the story of Bujang Senang, a crocodile incarnation of an Iban warrior named Simalungun. Simalungun is very powerful and difficult to defeat because it is believed to be invulnerable. Period, a group of enemies kidnapped Simalungun's wife to urge her wife to divulge the secret of her husband's immunity. His wife remained silent and was eventually killed. Simalungun got angry and started taking revenge, and fighting broke out. In the battle, Simalungun had fallen into the river. Then, the secret of the immunity was leaked because the immune system would be lost if Simalungun entered the river. After being killed, the husband's body was drowned in the Batang Lupar River. At that time, God appeared and made a curse on Simalungun to become a large and ferocious Crocodile. The crocodile hunted down the descendants of those who killed him and his wife. The crocodile is known as Bujang Senang. In the context of reality, the people of Sungai Batang Lupar and the entire Rajang River have been terrified of Bujang Senang since the 1940s. The enormous and unique crocodile has a white stripe on the back of his body. It is not known how many were killed by the Reptilians. Only in 1992 did the Bujang Senang manage to be killed. It was complicated to kill him with ordinary shots and spears until finally, Bujang Senang was successfully killed with a nail bullet by the guidance of a crocodile handler.

(Source text of the story and additional information: Nasron Sira Rahim. 2015. "Mystery Series: Bujang Senang Curse Iban Warriors". In BH Online, May 27)

4. Sacred Concepts In Folklore / Oral Stories

In the context of oral stories, stories considered sacred and should not be played around are oral stories referred to as myths. Myth is not just a story describing entertaining scenes, not just describing the hero's good looks and beauty; its nature is much more than that. Myth is said to convey something big and vital to the community; even more importantly, it is considered authentic or referred to as "true narratives" by Basscom (1984:1).

According to Dundes (1984: 1), a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form. In other words, these sacred stories usually tell the origin of something that involves the life of the world and humans from the past until it leads to the present day. Harun Mat Piah et al (2000: 106) also give a parallel definition to Dundes because it describes myths as stories considered to happen and are sacred. The figures or characters involved in the myth are the subtle persons, the gods or the demigods". Harun Mat Piah's writings also state that the sacred myth is one of the principles of belief about things and events by the people who own and inherit the sacred story.

In addition to the above views, there is another view from Western scholars with a different approach. Seigel (1999: 37) suggests a rather unique view: "Myths and rituals operate together...myth and rituals cannot exist without each other". Based on this view, something said to be sacred sometimes needs to be complemented with certain ritual practices. The ritual in this context may be in ritual, worship, entertaining practices, etc. Indirectly, the sacred story will be more believable because there is physical evidence to illustrate that the community respects and believes the story.

Based on the views of Western and Malaysian scholars above, it can be concluded that in the context of tradition, oral stories which are sacred must contain several specific characteristics, such as:

- i) is sacred and fundamental for the community of owners
- ii) is associated with a belief in a particular community
- iii) non-human characters
- iv) The practice of ritual

The crocodile stories discussed in this paper confirm the characteristics of a sacred story based on the views of these scholars. It is because the crocodile stories that focus on this discussion are not ordinary animal stories that are considered entertainment and jokes. Further, any crocodile character that shows aspects of stupidity is easily deceived, or the crocodile character is played by other characters who are smaller or weaker. On the other hand, the crocodile character in these stories is more violent, capable of killing and at the same time is also considered a protector and friend to certain people who live near their habitat.

The first characteristic of a sacred story is a character who is considered sacred, has certain supernatural powers, and is trustworthy by the community. It can be seen in the story of crocodiles in South Sulawesi. Based on the story notes in the portal, it was found that the crocodile character was believed to be twins with humans. The story describes a mother who was convinced that the little crocodile that appeared after her son's death was her son's twin. The belief is also based on the condition that the crocodile moves slowly, just like the movement of his disabled son during life. It is also said in other villages that humans can share the same river with crocodiles without disturbance. The activity also rejected their belief that crocodiles are indeed twins with one of the residents there, and indeed, the relationship between crocodiles and humans will be closer like brothers.

This issue of trust is not limited to oral stories. The Indonesian newspaper Portal detiknews dated November 12, 2020, also featured news with the title "Crocodiles are believed to be human twins, the Bugis-Makassar myth is the origin" (see Hermawan Napili in news.detik.com/berita/d-525). The news has rewritten that a resident in a village in the city of Makassar defended crocodiles in his home because he believed the crocodiles are human twins and are considered descendants of humans. Apart from a good legacy of folktales, this story has also proven the existence of folk beliefs (traditional beliefs) that are still strong in the community.

Sacred stories associated with community beliefs can be seen in the story "Legend Of The Bujang Senang". Although the greatness of the crocodile's character was only obtained through oral stories, the attempt to kill him failed, and the community also had to use the services of a crocodile handler to try to find a way to help kill Bujang Senang. Only after a crocodile handler ordered the crocodile to be shot with a nail gun was it killed in 1992. As the legend mentions, this situation shows that some people believe Bujang Senang has extraordinary powers. Based on that belief, villagers need crocodile handler skills to help to kill the crocodile. Although

sophisticated firearms were available in 1992, the services of handlers are still relevant, given their concerns over the crocodile's power and terror. In fact, not the story of Bujang Senang, the services of crocodile handlers are still used to help catch crocodiles or find victims killed by crocodiles. The charmer is still considered important as a link with the mystical powers that inhabit the rivers of this archipelago.

The character of a sacred story is also associated with characters who are not ordinary people. Based on the three stories presented in this study, it is clear that the characters are very similar. The story depicts a human character who can be transformed or cursed into an enormous and ferocious crocodile. The story "Chalawan" from Thailand depicts a crocodile that can turn into a human and again turn into a crocodile at any desired moment. Similarly, in the story "Bujang Senang", the original character of the Iban warrior, Simalungun, was described as excellent and invincible. He defeated all the villains in the Batang Lupar River area. The description of that immunity also shows that this character is not a typical human. The Iban warrior is also said to have turned into an enormous crocodile after he was killed and his body thrown into the river.

The next feature is that something sacred is associated with ritual practices. In this context, the ritual practices associated with crocodiles are recounted in crocodile stories in South Sulawesi. In the story, the villagers often give "offerings" or banquets to the crocodiles in the river as a sign of their friendship and brotherhood. Although the ritual of feeding crocodiles is not told in depth, the practice is symbolic of reality in real life. Indeed, it is again associated with the practices of crocodile handlers who are called upon to assist certain parties when dealing with crocodile violence cases. The handler must have a particular method when 'dealing' with crocodiles. Mantras and offerings will be performed to persuade the crocodile to release the victim or ask the crocodile to leave a human settlement area.

The description of the ability of humans or handlers to interact with crocodiles closely can not only be seen or read in a purely oral story but also exist in real life. A Youtube channel, "Fitriyani Riska", often uploads videos of an old man who can befriend, interact and feed the giant crocodiles in the river without any protection and safety equipment. Indeed, the courage and skill were supported by certain rituals by individuals who were not made public.

Based on this research, it can be concluded that these crocodile stories are one of the most interesting river folklore to be studied and documented on a regular basis. It's no surprise that the film's creators have also made it a priority for the film's producers to make the character a central character in their films.

Furthermore, the story of this crocodile story is also indeed a very strong oral story of its influence on the beliefs of the people who are in the environment of the story. They do not consider this story merely a fantasy story but contains elements that are sacred and sacred.

In the end, it is very important that this kind of story is preserved and preserved throughout the ages. This is important because the crocodile story can be an important heritage and can also be one of the interesting tourist attractions to the area related to the story. The folklore river through the stories of crocodiles is fascinating to explore more deeply. Crocodile stories like this are not just animal stories aimed at delivering entertainment and jokes alone. On the other hand, crocodile stories can bring various aspects related to traditional beliefs, human relations with animals, human interaction with nature, but what is more interesting is that crocodile stories have many mysterious and mystical elements that may remain today.

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