

The Melanau folklore: An analysis of moral values

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Abstract

Melanau folklore, abundant with intricate narratives and moral lessons, serves as an essential vehicle for cultural transmission. This paper seeks to scrutinize the representation of moral values within Melanau folklore, specifically looking through its oral narratives through qualitative literary research. Drawing on the thematic analysis of 24 short stories derived from Morris's monograph, this paper identified four principal themes of moral values: Personal Development and Growth, Social and Cultural Values, Interactions with the Supernatural, and Environmental Stewardship. These moral values, deeply embedded in Melanau's worldview, are paramount to the community's understanding and interaction with their environment. Intriguingly, our analysis suggests that the inherent moral values of the Melanau are often intertwined with concepts related to the spirit world, indicating the pivotal role of supernatural elements in shaping the community's ethical landscape. This study highlights the rich moral fabric of Melanau narratives, elucidating their cultural identity and the broader context of their relationship with the supernatural world.

Keywords: Folklore, Melanau, moral values, narratives, oral stories

Introduction

The Melanau people, native to the coastal region of Sarawak, Malaysia, are endowed with a rich cultural heritage that shines through their distinct folklore. Being one of the many indigenous groups of Sarawak, their historical narrative is intricately interwoven with folklore, reinforcing their cultural heritage and shaping their collective identity (Sarawak Museum, 2013). In this context, Melanau folklore serves as a crucial conduit for transmitting societal values, beliefs, and moral principles, thus providing an interpretive lens into their cultural matrix. Recognizing folklore's instrumental role in cultural transmission, this study tries to link the moral dimension of Melanau's oral narratives with their societal norms and ethics.

Often, folklore elucidates the genesis of cultural practices and fortifies social norms pertaining to behaviour, morality, and etiquette. It serves as an essential component of tradition, reflecting the beliefs, values, and experiences of its creators and transmitters. Cultural transmission primarily occurs through oral traditions, a process by which stories, songs, and beliefs are verbally passed from one generation to the next. In the context of indigenous knowledge, this encompasses a wide array of elements—ranging from cultural rituals, oral histories, and legendary tales to

musical compositions, mythological narratives, aphorisms, and traditional dances. It also includes societal regulations, local dialects, and classification systems. All these facets of indigenous wisdom are traditionally handed down across successive generations, as concurred by Grenier (1998). This continual process plays a vital role in safeguarding a community's cultural heritage and fostering the perpetuation and evolution of its traditions over time.

Despite the importance of discerning the moral values encapsulated within folklore, existing research has inadequately delved into this aspect of Melanau culture. Therefore, this study intends to bridge this lacuna by examining the manifestation of moral values, both explicit and implicit, within the narratives of Melanau folklore. This investigation unravels the narratives of moral values embedded in these stories, thereby offering profound insights into Melanau society and its prevailing moral ethos.

Literature review

Folklore research is a multidimensional field encompassing the collection, documentation, analysis, and interpretation of a community's customs and traditions. The significance of folklore study lies in its ability to yield insights into a people's cultural heritage, offering a profound understanding of a community's identity and worldviews (Geia et al., 2013). Additionally, such research illuminates the mechanisms through which these cultural elements are transmitted and preserved across generations.

In Malaysia, and more specifically in Sarawak, the study of folklore has deep historical roots, stretching back to the time of the Brooke administration. It was during this period that British academics first began the systematic recording of indigenous folktales and songs. The era of the Brooke administration, succeeded by British colonial governance, saw significant efforts by ethnographers to collect and safeguard the indigenous folklore of Sarawak. The scientific research and cultural conservation efforts were particularly emphasized during the reign of the Brookes, especially during the reign of Rajah Charles Brooke who desired to put Sarawak 'on the map' in this area of international endeavour (Morris, 2020).

Notable British ethnographers such as Charles Hose, Tom Harrisson, and Harold Stephen Morris have significantly contributed to this field, studying and documenting the cultures and customs of various indigenous groups in Sarawak. Their work has established an invaluable repository of the lives of Borneo's indigenous inhabitants. Although the narratives captured by these scholars may bear the imprint of their Western lens - as noted by Robert (2021) - they nonetheless remain as an essential historical record.

In Malaya, the rise of Malay folklore was interpreted by Winstedt (1939) as a consequence of a familiar British colonial tactic which involves the assimilation and dominance over 'local wisdom' for colonial purposes. In line with this argument, Shamsul (2000) explains this information acquisition served as an essential component of the British administrative strategy, crucial for shaping the colonial image and for amassing information about the indigenous people of Malaya. In which, fundamentally, it involves the strategic creation of a form of knowledge that the colonial powers could manipulate and manage. In a divergent argument, however, Mohd Taib (1974) believes that Malay oral traditions are not a colonial fabrication but genuine and innovative literary works that emerged during the early stages of societal development. He views these narratives as fundamental to the progression of Malay civilization, serving as an indispensable tool