

# A Comparative Study of Human-Nature Relationship in Indonesian and Japanese Folklore

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## Abstract

Human and nature are inseparable as they become a unit and interchange with each other where both of relationships are also described in a lot of literature everywhere. In Indonesia, the depictions of the relationship are told through folklore. *La Moelu* from Southeast Sulawesi tells a story about a boy who kept his fish that he caught from fishing, took care of it, and the fish granted him a reward. There's also a Japanese folklore about a man who saved a wounded crane and it returned him a favor for the assistance, called *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*. As these two stories similarly talk about men-nature relation, this research aims to compare the cultural background and the mutual relationship between men and nature. The analysis will be done through the first wave of ecocriticism perspective. This research reveals that both of the main characters from those stories have attempted to preserve nature. However, when greed seeps into men's consciousness, they become less considerate of the environment and have to face the consequences of their actions. This research demonstrates the men-nature relation through folklore as a way to show individuals' dynamic reactions and behavior towards nature to uncover nature's imbalance when human attitudes deviate.

**Keywords:** comparative study, first wave ecocriticism, Indonesian & Japanese folklore

## INTRODUCTION

One of the traditions of civilization from ancient times to the present is telling stories. Quoting Harter, Japp, and Beck, Hancox (2011) says that telling stories is a basic human ability to interpret reality. As stories pass on cultural values, customs, and beliefs from generation to generation, they play a critical role in forming culture and promoting environmental consciousness. People may then reinforce their sense of cultural identification and pride by learning about common experiences, history, and heritage. Folklore is one way the story is passed down.

It originally meant customs, old traditions, still-practiced holidays, ageless sayings and tales, old songs and timeless ballads, and ancient myths and legends. Folklore also suggested irrationality, with beliefs in sprites, spirits, fairies, goblins, ghosts, and demons all rejected by experience and common reason. It speaks of the belief in talismans, amulets, and omens (Ben-Amos, 2020). While Dundes (2007) explained folklore as “an essential way that cultural knowledge and wisdom is passed down from generation to generation and from peer to peer.” He defines folk as “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one linking factor.” This implies that it can refer to the group of people with culturally identifiable characteristics

that can distinguish them from other groups, and the tradition (*lore*) passed down through generations through oral or by example accompanied by action. It can be said that Folklore is a vessel that brings and passes different kinds of customs, cultures, and values including environmental consciousness and preservation.

Folklore has existed in every part of the world. In Indonesia, one of the examples of many folklore stories is *La Moelu* from Southeast Sulawesi. It tells the story of a poor teenage boy who lives with his father in a hamlet in Muna Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. One day, La Moelu went fishing in the river. It was getting late in the afternoon and he was still waiting for the fish to eat his bait. Suddenly, a fish ate his bait and he felt very happy. So, he brought the fish home to show his father and told him to keep the fish. The next day the fish got bigger and bigger, and since they didn't have a container that could hold the fish, they took it out to sea. The fish was named Jinnande. La Moelu always took care of and fed it. Unbeknownst to him, other people were watching him and had evil intentions to catch Jinnande. They followed what La Moelu did and called the fish. They decide to kill it and eat it. La Moelu was surprised when he returned to the sea and found that the fish did not come after being called several times. Soon, he found out that the fish was dead and eaten. He became extremely sad. La Moelu picked up the fish's bones and buried them in memory of Jinnande the fish. The next day, to his great surprise, a plant with gold stems, silver leaves, diamond flowers, and diamond fruit grew on it. La Moelu was delighted and sold the plant and the proceeds were used to help the poor in the village.

Moving towards the east, Japan has a popular folklore called *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*. In a distant land, a young man saved a white crane from a falling arrow while working on his farm. The crane was able to fly again, and the young man sent it back to the sky, warning it to avoid

hunters. As night fell, he found a beautiful woman, who was his wife. Despite his poor circumstances, they had a happy life together, and the rice sack remained full. One day, the woman asked the young man to build her a weaving room, and he waited patiently for her to come out. After seven days, the woman showed him the most beautiful cloth he had ever seen. The next day, the cloth sold for many coins, and the young man returned home. The woman continued weaving, and the young man wondered how she could weave such beautiful cloth without thread. He peeked into the room, and to his surprise, a crane was weaving a cloth, plucking out its feathers for thread. The crane told the young man that it was the crane that saved him and wanted to repay him for becoming his wife. The crane then left the finished cloth to remember him by, and the crane disappeared into the sky.

In this research, the two folklore above were compared based on ecocriticism perspective where both of the stories tell the interaction between human and nature. Ecocriticism is the study of how nature and the environment are portrayed in literature, especially as it relates to the transmission of values (Ramzan et al., 2023). The term "eco" is derived from the Greek word "oikos," which means "household" or "earth," and the word "logy" is derived from the word "logos," which means "logical discourse." Combined, they refer to criticism of how the home and environment are portrayed in literature (Mishra, 2016). It is described as "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" by Garrard (2004) in his book *Ecocriticism*. According to Kerridge (1998) ecocriticism "seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis." From Joseph Wood Krutch's perspective, Thoreau's writings are not so much about plants, animals, or birds as they are about his relationship with them—one might almost argue that it is about 'himself in connection with nature.' (In 1948,

Henry David Thoreau). Beyond merely studying nature, further ecocriticism has set itself apart from traditional nature writing, first by emphasizing the relationship between the human and non-human worlds and afterward by taking an ethical stand and being devoted to the natural environment.

As identified by Lawrence Buell, there are two waves of ecocriticism. The term "environment" in first-wave ecocriticism essentially meant the "natural environment." It was centered on wilderness fiction, nature poetry, and nature writing. At first, ecocriticism was thought to align with the objectives of earthcare. Contributing to "the struggle to preserve the 'biotic community' " was its stated objective (Coupe 2000: 4). "The effects of culture upon nature, to celebrate nature, berate its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action," was the assessment made by the seminal first-wave ecocriticism (Howarth 1996: 69). To conceive a "philosophy of organism" that would dismantle "the hierarchical separations between human beings and other elements of the natural world," the ecocritic may attempt to reinterpret culture itself in organicist terms during this process (Elder 1985: 172). While the second wave of ecocriticism focuses on environmental justice concerns and "social ecocriticism," which takes "urban landscape as seriously as natural landscape." Revisionist ecocriticism, also known as urban ecocriticism, examines the impact of nature on urban areas and the environmental injustices committed against the underprivileged. Eco-critics interpret nature writings and use them to critique how society's values and traditions devalue nature. This movement is currently in its third phase, according to feminist scholars.

Numerous research has been done on this subject; Arianto and Simanjuntak (2020) address one such study, "The Representation of Ecocriticism in the Folklore of Mak Ungkai Spirit." The study demonstrates how one could

view nature and humans from the perspective of nature as human subjects and objects. Nature was considered the mother of the earth, an ethical model of caring, and a holistic entity. In the meantime, violence and the exploitation of nature depict nature as an object. An ecocritical lens gives Tanikawa Shuntarou's poems a new meaning, as shown in another study by Meilantari and Lenstari (2022) titled "Environmental Representation from Tanikawa Shuntarou's Poetry: An Ecocritical Approach." The subsequent interpretation focuses mostly on the environment, emphasizing that taking care of the planet starts the moment you get up in the morning. With all that being stated, this research purpose is to compare the Indonesian folklore *La Moelu* and the Japanese folklore *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* to see how humans behave and interact as well as their relationship with nature viewed in the first wave of ecocriticism.

## **METHODS**

The qualitative method is used in this study. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the qualitative method is any research methodology that generates results not obtained by statistical analysis or other quantitative techniques as it is said of these kinds of study that they emphasize "cases and contexts." In other words, they give "authentic interpretations that are sensitive to specific social-historical contexts" and thoroughly examine situations that are relevant to their selected subjects (Neuman 2006:151). The story's narration and the characters' spoken words served as the source of the collected data. There were multiple steps involved in the collection and analysis of the data. First, read the material through from beginning to end using close reading techniques. Next, compare the two texts with an emphasis on the characters' interactions with nature. By using the first wave of ecocriticism theory, the researcher was able to derive the analysis's findings and discussion.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

## Result

### Human-nature relationship in *La Moelu*

This section discusses the result of the relationship between humans and nature in Indonesian folklore *La Moelu*.

From the folklore, it can be seen that to fulfill his and his father's needs, La Moelu helped his father to fish in the river near his house. He got a small fish and brought it home. Then he asked his father what he would do with the fish.

*"Sebaiknya ikan ini diapakan, Ayah?" tanya La Moelu. (Par. 9)*

*"Sebaiknya kamu pelihara saja ikan itu, Anakku!..." (Par. 10)*

From the quote above, it can be seen that his father told La Moelu to take care of it instead of eating the fish. This is in line with the theory that the characters in this story are trying to protect nature as illustrated through their initiatives and actions to take care of the fish.

Furthermore, the relationship between humans and nature can be seen in the story when the fish he takes care of gets so big that it cannot fit in a mortar, his father tells La Moelu to release the fish into the sea and also gives the fish a name.

*"Hai, Ikan! Aku memberimu nama Jinnande Teremombonga. Jika aku memanggil nama itu, segeralah kamu datang ke tepi laut, karena aku akan memberimu makan!" ujar La Moelu. (Par. 17)*

*Ikan itu pun mengibas-ngibaskan ekornya pertanda setuju. Setelah itu, La Moelu pun melepaskannya. Ikan itu tampak senang dan gembira karena bisa berenang dengan bebas di samudera luas. (Par. 18)*

The above quote shows La Moelu's good intention to name and feed the fish named Jinnande. Interestingly, Jinnande's response shows how happy she is to be cared for by La Moelu by wagging her tail. In addition, the fish seemed happy to be swimming freely in the ocean. The

interaction between La Moelu and Jinnande can be said to display a good response.

Then, the interaction between humans and nature becomes dynamic because of the different interactions between Jinnande and three young men. One morning, the three youths spied on La Moelu while he was feeding Jinnande. When they saw Jinnande, they had the evil intention to catch the fish. They did exactly what La Moelu did by calling Jinnande shouting. But when Jinnande saw that it wasn't La Moelu calling her, she immediately swam back to the sea.

*"Hai, kenapa ikan itu pergi lagi?" tanya pemuda yang berteriak tadi. (Par. 28)*

*"Ah, barangkali dia takut melihat kamu. Mundurlah! Biar aku yang mencoba memanggilnya," kata pemuda yang lainnya seraya maju ke tepi laut. (Par. 29)*

*Tidak berapa lama setelah pemuda itu berteriak memanggilnya, Jinnande Teremombonga datang lagi. Ketika melihat wajah orang yang memanggilnya tidak sama dengan wajah tuannya, ia pun segera kembali ke tengah laut. (Par. 30)*

From the conversation and narration above, we can see the interaction between Jinnande and the three young men. Jinnande, who was called, the moment she saw who called her, turned away and left. This means that Jinnande knows she will only come when La Moelu calls her. This is because of the bonded relationship between La Moelu and Jinnande that has been established so that when called by the three young men she left. The sense of trust built between La Moelu and Jinnande, made Jinnande reject the call of the three young men.

The three youths insisted on capturing Jinnande and worked together to summon and spear the fish.

*Setelah berembuk, ketiga pemuda tersebut menemukan satu cara, yakni*

*salah seorang dari mereka akan berteriak memanggil ikan itu, sementara dua orang lainnya akan menombaknya. Ternyata rencana mereka berhasil. Pada saat ikan itu datang ke tepi laut, kedua pemuda yang sudah bersiap-siap segera menombaknya. Ikan itu pun mati seketika. Mereka memotong-motong daging ikan itu lalu membagi-baginya. Setiap orang mendapat bagian satu pikul. Setelah itu, mereka membawa pulang bagian masing-masing. Betapa senangnya hati keluarga mereka saat melihat daging ikan sebanyak itu. (Par. 31)*

From this paragraph, it can be seen how greed pervades humans, making them blind and doing whatever they want to satisfy their desires. As a result, the dead Jinnande were distributed for food.

La Moelu, who returned to the sea to feed Jinnande, was astonished that Jinnande did not come when he called her many times. Later that evening, when he visited the house of one of the young men who stole his fish, and happened to be eating with his family, he saw that the side dish they were eating was made from the meat of a large fish. Upon inquiring, it turned out that it was indeed Jinnande that they were eating. He picked up Jinnande's bones and buried them in front of his house. The next morning, he was shocked at what he found.

*Keesokan harinya, La Moelu dikejutkan oleh sesuatu yang aneh terjadi pada kuburan itu, di atasnya tumbuh sebuah tanaman. Anehnya lagi, tanaman itu berbatang emas, berdaun perak, berbunga intan, dan berbuah berlian. Ia pun segera memberitahukan peristiwa aneh itu kepada ayahnya. (Par. 44)*

*'Ayah! Coba lihat tanaman ajaib di depan rumah kita!' ajak La Moelu. (Par. 45)*

Through the narration and quote above we can see that the bones La Moelu buried can produce the magic plant. It can be inferred also that it is Jinnande's way of thanking La Moelu for taking care of her from childhood until Jinnande grew up. Although in the end Jinnande had to die and be eaten, nature always has a way of giving good things to humans who have given their kindness and sincerity. In the end, La Moelu was able to help the other villagers and they respected and loved La Moelu.

#### **Human-nature relationship in *Tsuru no Ongaeshi***

This section discusses the result of the relationship of the human and nature in Japanese folklore *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*.

The story was about a young man who was working on his farm when a white crane swooped down and crashed to the ground. Sadly, an arrow pierced through one of its wings and he decided to help it.

*Taking pity on the crane, he pulled out the arrow and cleaned the wound. Thanks to his care the bird was soon able to fly again. The young man sent the crane back to the sky, saying, "Be careful to avoid hunters." The crane circled three times over his head, let out a cry as if in thanks, and then flew away (Par. 1)*

The lines above show how the man showed his compassion and care for the white crane by helping to remove the arrow and clean the wound, then releasing it. The white crane responded by flying around the man to thank him.

When the man returned home, he found a woman in his house and told him she was his wife. The man was very surprised. But the two lived happily together. Food was always available.

*"Welcome home. I am your wife," said the woman. The young man was surprised and said, "I am very poor, and cannot support you." The woman answered, pointing to a small sack, "Don't worry, I have plenty of rice," and began preparing dinner. The young man was puzzled,*

*but the two began a happy life together. And the rice sack, mysteriously, remained full always. (Par. 2)*

Through the quote above, it can be interpreted that the woman is a helper sent to assist the man. After the previous series of events she helped the white crane, the woman she met in his house was a good sign for what he had done.

Then, since the woman was living with the man, the woman asked for a weaving room. She told him not to peek. Then after 7 days, the woman came out with a beautiful cloth in her hand. She told the man to sell the cloth. As a result, he made a lot of money. However, one time out of curiosity, he tried to peek into the room, even though it had been forbidden before.

*Curiosity began to overtake the man, who wondered, "How can she weave such beautiful cloth with no thread?" Soon he could stand it no longer and, desperate to know his wife's secret, peeked into the room. To his great shock, his wife was gone. Instead, a crane sat intently at the loom weaving a cloth, plucking out its own feathers for thread. (Par. 4)*

*The bird then noticed the young man peeking in and said, "I am the crane that you saved. I wanted to repay you so I became your wife, but now that you have seen my true form I can stay here no longer." Then, handing the man the finished cloth, it said, "I leave you this to remember me by." The crane then abruptly flew off into the sky and disappeared forever. (Par. 5)*

How surprised the man was to find that his wife was the white crane that knitted the cloth. She was the white crane that the man had rescued. However, because the man broke the promise he made over the curiosity eating away at his soul, he had to face the consequences of losing his wife.

## **Discussion**

From the results above, the two findings can be compared by looking at the first wave of ecocriticism. Both stories discuss how the interaction between humans and nature is told in

folklore. In Indonesian folklore, the interaction between humans and nature, depicted by La Moelu, Jinnande, and three young men, illustrates a dynamic relationship due to the different attitudes that humans have towards nature. La Moelu's attitude towards Jinnande shows his kindness and consistency in taking care of Jinnande. This draws a good response from Jinnande who always comes when called by La Moelu. A sense of loyalty and trust is built between the two of them so that there is a harmonious relationship. *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* also depicts a man helping a white crane from an arrow stuck in its wing. However, when greed creeps into the hearts of humans, then humans must bear the consequences. As depicted in Japanese folklore when the man broke his promise and peeped into the room. As a result, his wife left him for good. The man's act of peeping into the room was proof of the man's unfaithfulness and had to bear the consequences. The relationship was broken. In *La Moelu*, three malicious and greedy young men who caught Jinnande and ate it also ended up with nothing. Instead, the kind La Moelu who buried Jinnande's bones received a magical plant as a gift from Jinnande.

As the point of the first wave of ecocriticism emphasizes on earthcare and preserving the biotic community, the two folktales have depicted how the characters inside the story have shown the act of preserving nature. But nature has become unbalanced as a result of greedy humans. Relationships become broken and cause unpleasant consequences. This also shows how folklore became an important medium to tell and teach humans how we should respect nature. As folklore is included in oral literature, it reflects the style of life of the people. People who live near rivers, for example, base their folklore on the sea and its creatures, whereas hunters' folklore is centered on the forest, animals, and hunting. Consequently, the same fundamental plot is told in a variety of ways, with the characters and scene changing based on the people's jobs and surroundings (World Literature: EN310A, Term 2 2024). Southeast Sulawesi, which has an archipelago geography, has a coastal background story such as the story of *La Moelu*. Meanwhile, the

background in Japan also adapts to the region and existing animals such as white cranes. Therefore, folklore can function to raise awareness about environmental issues by making them relatable and personal. Also exposing values towards nature such as preserving, respecting, compassionate, and wisdom.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that there are similarities between the folklore studied based on the outcomes of the discussion on the comparative research between Indonesian literary works in the form of folklore *La Moelu* and Japanese literary works in the form of folklore entitled *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*. The similarity between the two is in the attitude of the humans in the story who initially showed care and initiative to help the fish and also the crane, thus creating a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. However, when human attitudes begin to deviate, influenced by greed and indifference, the relationship between humans and nature will be disrupted. Humans will pay a price for their deeds, and nature will be impacted. It is hoped that the findings of this comparative literature research study will serve as a guide for future studies related to ecocriticism analysis or comparative analysis of Japanese and Indonesian folklore.

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