

THE PAPUAN FOLKTALE "THE MYTH OF THE SACRED TREE OF KERLONGGONA" AS A REFLECTION OF ECOLOGICAL WISDOM IN PROTECTING NATURE

Hasrul Rahman, Agus Nuryatin, RM. Teguh Supriyanto, Mukh. Doyin

Language Education Science

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Semarang, Indonesia

hasrulrahman@students.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

The environment plays a vital role in balancing the lives of all creatures on Earth. The reciprocal relationship between humans and nature must be continuously preserved because only humans can maintain the existing ecosystem. An understanding of environmental preservation can be gleaned from the folklore found in every region. This is the foundation of a society's civilization. Papuan folklore plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of ownership of the natural environment. This is because Papuan folklore emphasizes compelling life principles regarding the treatment of nature. This study examines the myth in the folktale entitled Kerlonggona, the Sacred Tree from Wamena, as a reflection of ecological wisdom in protecting nature from human greed. This study uses an ecocritical approach to the analysis of Papuan folklore, while the method employed is qualitative content. The results depict the lives of Papuan people who still hold trees sacred as a form of effort to protect their natural environment from irresponsible communities. Their love for nature is shaped by their disdain for customary law and their prioritization of customary law to uphold rules passed down through generations.

Keywords – Ecocriticism, Kerlonggana Myth, Papua

Introduction

Folklore plays a crucial role in promoting a region's cultural identity. This role should serve as a reference for developing regional characteristics as part of determining policies that support the community, especially its environment. Policies that uphold regional cultural identity indirectly determine the sustainability of a nation, thus ensuring the continued protection of the rights of the community, especially its natural environment. Papuan folklore, for example, can be utilized for the greater good. This is because Papuan folklore consistently demonstrates the identity of its people, who depend on their natural environment for their livelihood. Environmental damage cannot be allowed to continue. Pusaka (2022) reports on its website that analysis of Nusantara Atlas satellite imagery maps

indicates that deforestation in Papua has occurred over 1,150 hectares since early January and June 2022. Most of this deforestation occurred within oil palm plantations and industrial timber plantations, which are expanding their operations.

The situation surrounding Papua's forest destruction demonstrates that existing policies are not aligned with the community's identity. Stakeholders should align the community's conditions with the ecological wisdom imparted through folklore and local wisdom. Hakubun (2018) stated that young people in urban areas are starting to forget their culture, one of which is the origins of their folktales, many of which they lack understanding of, as well as various other cultures, which they may be less familiar with. Folktales play a crucial role in harmonizing the

relationship between humans and their environment or nature. Arianto and Simanjuntak (2020) emphasized that one effort to restore public awareness of the environment is to inspire local wisdom and culture. One way to do this is by re-adopting local traditions and customs. In this regard, Qurrotul'ain and Soleh (2024) stated that the environmental crisis cannot be separated from the role of humans in their environment. Humans are one of the primary factors causing environmental damage. The root of this problem lies in humanity's dichotomous and anthropocentric perspective, which has given rise to exploitative behavior towards nature.

The Papuan folktale *Kerlonggona*, the Sacred Tree from Wamena, serves as an important illustration for Papuans, especially the younger generation, in developing their knowledge of a way of life that upholds moral values. Amos (1971) stated that there are three basic concepts underlying various definitions of folklore: a body of knowledge, a way of thinking, or an art form. Yektingtyas and Dewi (2023) stated that local wisdom is taught explicitly or implicitly in folklore, the authors of which are generally unknown. One area of local knowledge is about the importance of environmental conservation.

Local wisdom that emphasizes environmental concepts should be able to become the seed of knowledge that supports society. Glotfelty (1996) ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literary works and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism focuses on gender and Marxist criticism focuses on class/production, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered perspective to read texts. It examines how nature is represented, how human-nonhuman relations are

constructed, what ecological values/ethics are normalized, and how language, genre, and narrative influence attitudes and practices towards nature. The concept of literary ecocriticism examines the representation of nature and human relations with the environment through literary texts, with a cross-disciplinary approach that integrates ecology, culture, and politics (Garrard, 2004). Based on this explanation, further understanding of the role of folklore in shaping a region's identity is needed, so that folklore is not merely meaningless reading material for the benefit of its people. Therefore, this study aims to identify the way of life of the Papuan people, particularly Wamena, regarding their environment. His life principle of treating the *Kerlonggona* tree for its survival is an attraction as a symbol of life that is worth adopting.

Method

The type of research used is descriptive qualitative with a literary ecocritic approach. The ecocritic approach is used to highlight the relationship between humans and their environment or nature. This is done so that this research focuses on the natural environment in folklore. According to Cresweel (2016), qualitative research is a method for exploring and understanding the meaning that a number of individuals or groups of people ascribe to social or humanitarian problems. This research must apply an inductive research perspective, have individual meaning, and translate the complexity of a problem. In this case, the solution procedure is by describing the conditions of the subject and object of research based on the actual problem. The Papuan folktale entitled *Kerlonggona*, the Sacred Tree from Wamena was used as the object in this research. This folktale was published by the Papua Provincial Language Center

in 2014. Then, the subject is literary ecocriticism related to the behavior of Papuan people in treating nature. The research stages are carried out through in-depth reading, analysis, and documentation of findings that are carried out repeatedly to obtain valid data. The data analysis method uses a content analysis method with study validity that utilizes source and data triangulation. According to Cresweel (2016), validity is used to check the accuracy and credibility of research results by applying certain procedures.

Finding and Discussion

A. Kerlonggona Trees as a Conservation Media

Researchers use the subject of ecocriticism to analyze the Papuan folklore entitled "Kerlonggona Sacred Tree from Wamena". Ecocriticism examines how humans imagine and describe human-environment relations in various cultural products. This field emerged from—and is critical of—the modern environmental movement. In practice, ecocriticism traces the development of this movement's discourse and focuses on key issues such as pollution, deforestation, environmental degradation, housing problems, threats to flora and fauna, and the planet's ecological problems in general (Garrard, 2004).

The Papuan folktale "Kerlonggona" (The Sacred Tree of Wamena) is one story that emphasizes the importance of respecting and appreciating trees. The people of Wamena, in particular, believe that intentionally destroying nature will negatively impact them. The local community understands how to treat nature properly, as seen in the following excerpt:

"Local people often hold ritual events under this tree, so they consider it a sacred place. Kerlonggona is used as a

gathering place for various ancestral spirits, a place to store sacred objects, such as war tools, axes, stones, noken, koteka, pig bones, and other objects considered valuable" (Widodo ed., 2014, p. 44).

This quote openly conveys the message that respecting nature will bring peace, especially to the surrounding community. By considering trees sacred, it will indirectly give rise to feelings of fear if you carry out actions that harm the environment, especially cutting down trees carelessly. This, in turn, will impact the environment. Myths like this should be respected, especially those that have a positive impact on the environment. Myths are sacred stories conveyed through language (Wadiji, 2011).

Belief in sacred trees has a positive side that can encourage communities to continue protecting their forests from various threats. Through this belief, communities work together to remind others. In addition, by placing a sacred tree as a meeting location, it indirectly gives a positive impression of the Kerlonggona tree as an icon or sacred place for the survival of the local community.

Three days before going to war, the elders and traditional leaders hold a meeting first to organize war strategies and solve the problems they face. Mika and the traditional elders carried out a ritual event by calling their spellcaster. While whispering prayers, water was sprinkled on this banyan tree. They offer offerings of pork pieces while begging their ancestors. Morning came to evening and it was already the 2nd day that there were no signs yet (Widodo ed., 2014, p. 45).

The above quote demonstrates the existence of sound environmental

ethics. Natural ethics positions Kerlonggona as the ecological axis that prioritizes deliberation, thus positioning nature as part of the ancestors tasked with providing consideration in all matters. In this context, nature will serve as a refuge from various human threats and the threat of natural disasters. The solidarity of the community in protecting nature is the main foundation in efforts to preserve local culture. Mika, as a traditional elder, is able to provide sound education to his community. The offerings given to the tree indicate the need for spiritual ecology within the community. The ceremonial procession will certainly increase the community's love for nature, which has provided benefits in their lives. Spiritual ecology can be understood as a field of intellectual study and dynamic practice that connects and integrates the relationship between religion and spirituality on the one hand, with ecology, the environment, and the environmental movement (environmentalism) on the other (Sponsel, 2014).

Viewing trees and nature as living entities with intrinsic value will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the environment. This awareness is still very limited in urban areas. Ultimately, the reciprocal relationship between nature and humans will be felt by humans themselves. There needs to be an awareness of the principle that places nature as an entity that is united and connected to humans, not simply an object to be exploited. This principle emphasizes that humans and nature are interdependent and must live in harmony to maintain the sustainability of life. This concept needs to be continuously preserved in various communities, as is the practice of the Papuan people, particularly the people of Wamena. The spiritual ecology practiced by the Wamena people

through their beliefs can be a concrete example of the need to instill a spirit of realizing spiritual knowledge, in this case, their religion. Because every belief certainly teaches something good, especially regarding the treatment of nature.

The Kerlonggona, or banyan tree, still stands today. The local community maintains it carefully because of the benefits it has provided to the community (Widodo ed., 2014, 46).

The quote above provides a deep understanding of how humans should treat nature. Trees, as a source of life capable of protecting against various natural disasters, must of course be properly cared for. Kerlonggona trees are an important part of the Wamena community's efforts to protect their region from various environmental damage. The Wamena community's efforts to preserve and protect natural resources, the environment, and biodiversity serve as a conservation medium that can be emulated by other communities in treating their natural environment. In this case, society must build solidarity in responding to it. Prasetya and Nurhadi (2019) state that the community views nature and all its contents as something that must be accepted as is. In this relationship, humans adapt their lifestyles to the rhythms and laws of nature, not the other way around. Awareness of the connection between humans and nature makes them understand that human existence is an inseparable part of the surrounding environment. Therefore, acts of destroying nature are seen as a direct threat to human survival.

Trees play a vital role in forest ecosystems by altering carbon balance, nutrient cycles, and air dynamics. Forest ecosystems support enormous terrestrial biodiversity and support the livelihoods

of communities worldwide (Pan, 2013). In this case, the Wamena community understands well the principle of respecting and appreciating nature. The Kerlonggana tree is considered a sacred site because they understand how to treat their natural environment. This principle of respect for nature is a moral responsibility, as humans are ontologically an integral part of nature. The responsibility to protect it is not individual but collective (Keraf, 2010).

B. The Role of Sacred Trees in Local Culture

A work of literature, including mythical stories, sometimes reveals real-life realities (Arianto and Simnajat, 2020). Folktales are compelling because they convey the identity of a community. Studying folklore in depth is crucial because it aims to improve people's lives. Furthermore, it is crucial for national unity (Dananjaya, 1994). Local communities play a role in preserving their cultural wisdom. A strong culture influences the survival of a region. In the Kerlonggona folktale, the traditional leader encourages the community to uphold their culture. Furthermore, he is also able to protect the ecosystem from damage.

Kosili Village is famous for its uniqueness. It boasts a sacred tree called Kerlonggona. Uniquely, this sacred site is the only one in Wamena. Not just anyone can manage, maintain, and administer Kerlonggona, except for certain individuals. The person who manages all activities in Kerlonggona is an elderly man named Mika (Widodo ed., 2014, p. 43).

As the village head, Mika is able to manage his territory well. This gives the impression that managing a region requires a leader who is wise towards the community and its environment. With good governance, nature will also

play a role in protecting its environment. However, if you carry out actions that aim to damage nature, there will certainly be consequences. Mika, as the central figure, has a strong character that enables him to protect his environment well. According to Yektiningtyas and Dewi (2023), a harmonious life between humans and nature is based on their reciprocal relationship. Humans need nature as their natural resources: land, forests, water, and food. Therefore, they preserve nature by not exploiting it at will.

One day, someone climbed this magical tree, and by some supernatural force, it suddenly grew taller. Another common occurrence is when elders or tribal chiefs are about to die. The next day, this sacred tree will emit a crying or screaming sound. The tree has even collapsed around Kerlonggona, and the sound can be heard by the Walak people, who live about 2 km away (Widodo ed., 2014, p. 46).

In an ecological context, the Kerlonggona tree serves as a symbol for all matters related to the principle of preserving the environment. The principles established prioritize customary rules that have been mutually agreed upon and must not be violated. These rules apply not only to the local community, but also to people outside the village who are legally obligated to respect these rules. The Wamena community, in the context of this folktale, considers the Kerlonggona tree sacred. This belief serves to protect it from irresponsible human exploitation. According to Suwandi et al. (2025), exploitation means humans use nature excessively, thus failing to protect it. On the other hand, violence against nature means humans intentionally commit acts of violence against it for gratification. However, nature will

always have a positive impact if humans are able to control their desire to exploit it.

The people of Kosili Village are proud to have Mika, who is very wise in managing their land. The Kosili people cultivate their crops every day. Their harvests are very satisfying, they have abundant livestock for daily needs, and they never experience a shortage of air. They believe that this sacred tree possesses supernatural powers, which is why it is so well cared for (Widodo ed., 2014, p. 47).

The reciprocal relationship between humans and nature is the main foundation in maintaining the environmental ecosystem. Similarly, the Kerlonggona tree is considered sacred. The impression of sacredness is created because it plays a crucial role in protecting the environment. People will naturally maintain their behavior when the word sacred is used for various purposes. This is the case with the Kerlonggona tree, or banyan tree, found in Wamena. The simple life principles exemplified by Mika in this character create a positive impression. The reciprocal relationship is deeply felt by the local community. They take care of the Kerlonggona tree as best they can, resulting in a significant impact on the region. Among other things, the community never lacks water and consistently produces satisfactory harvests. This phenomenon conveys a message to readers that nature should be treated with respect so that people can benefit from its natural environment.

Prameswara (2024) states that sugar palm and banyan trees are important trees for maintaining water sustainability. Sugar palm and banyan trees were chosen for planting because they are adapted to regional conditions, where these trees are large perennial

plants that function to protect their environment. Waton and Alfian (2020) several functions of plants in the landscape include direction, boundaries, shade, wind control, noise control, pollution control, and visual control. Evaluation of plants is carried out from an environmental and aesthetic perspective to optimize their effectiveness so that the architectural and functional functions of plants can be fulfilled optimally.

Plants that grow on earth provide life and beauty to humans. The earth is seen as the source of life, like a mother who gives birth to and nurtures living creatures. From the earth's womb, humans derive beauty and benefits through the flourishing plants and trees. The earth acts as both creator and guardian of life for all types of plants. Thanks to the earth, plants can grow, flower, and bear fruit. This confirms that a harmonious relationship between humans and nature will give rise to goodness, especially in the form of concern and care for the environment (Sarwiji et al., 2025). The goodness that humans build will also leave a good legacy for the surrounding environment.

Conclusions

The Wamena people's principles of life, which emphasize mutual cooperation and spirituality, are particularly interesting from an ecological perspective. Their community offers excellent examples to serve as icons for caring for their natural environment. Yet, their lives are far removed from the theories put forward by experts. Their life concepts instead provide new knowledge for other communities, emphasizing nature as an integral part of the community that should not be neglected. A strong character in protecting nature needs to be made part of growing knowledge that is integrated with environmental conservation media.

Papuan folklore is characterized by consistently prioritizing nature. This respect for nature and its concept of utilization differ significantly from folklore from other regions. This should be considered as mandatory reading for students to address the ongoing environmental degradation across Indonesia. Papuan folklore possesses all the attributes necessary to promote national environmental conservation.

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