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Cultural ecology and identity negotiation: Reading Padanglawas legends as a discourse of local resistance in the era of global literature

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Abstrac:t *The globalization of world literature creates an acute dilemma for local and national literatures, forcing them to navigate between sustaining unique cultural entities and succumbing to homogenizing external pressures. This article examines oral legends from Padanglawas Regency, North Sumatra Province, as dynamic arenas of cultural identity negotiation and localized resistance within contemporary planetary literary dynamics. Grounded in the theoretical premise that literature functions as a biocultural artifact inextricably linked to its ecological and social matrix, this research synthesizes a robust cultural ecology paradigm with a decolonial post-European comparative literature framework. Through an interpretive qualitative methodology examining a corpus of 16 documented Padanglawas folktales, this study systematically analyzes the reciprocal interactions between ecological parameters (habitat preservation, natural resource governance, sustainability) and socio-cultural dimensions (cosmology, kinship organization, moral regulations, ritual arts). The findings reveal that Padanglawas legends transcend archaic folkloric artifacts, operating instead as living socio-ecological laboratories that articulate complex ethical negotiations between human communities, natural environments, and political authority. Narratives such as "Si Oppung" and "Parmata Sapihak" function as structural instruments of social regulation and moral guardianship rooted in indigenous cosmology. Meanwhile, accounts like "Siti Halus" and "Liang Namuap" stage ontological mediations between human society and supernatural domains, whereas "Bah Rumun" and "Daulat Raja Chola" archive extensive pre-modern trans-regional and cross-cultural connectivities between the Indonesian Archipelago and South Asia. Consequently, local literature emerges not as a passive subordinate in comparative studies, but as an active agent forging ecological consciousness and cultural resilience against global homogenization. These insights demonstrate that comparative literature pedagogy must be strategically reoriented to defend national and regional literatures from planetary literary enclosure—directly echoing the visionary theme of the 35th KIK HISKI conference in 2026, "Indonesian Literature as a Citizen of World Literature," which emphasizes the indispensable bargaining power of localized cultures in the global arena.*

Keywords*: Cultural ecology, local literature, cultural identity, local resistance, Padanglawa*

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and planetary capitalism have exerted profound structural pressures on the architecture of world literature in the contemporary era (Damrosch, 2020). On the one hand, post-colonial national literatures are compelled to negotiate their standing on the international stage, striving to maintain valid identities as

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recognized citizens of world literature. On the other hand, they must constantly resist the homogenizing tidal wave of dominant Western aesthetic paradigms and neo-liberal cultural standardization. Local literature—serving as the foundational bedrock and vital circulatory system of national literature—is acutely vulnerable to these expansive global currents. A critical, existential question thus confronts contemporary literary scholarship: will local literature be reduced to a passive, voiceless spectator within its own historical homeland? (Suyadi, 2013, p. 1; Chi Pham et.al, 2025). Addressing this inquiry requires moving beyond conventional Eurocentric aesthetic evaluations toward a comprehensive engagement with indigenous oral traditions.

In its foundational formulation, comparative literature was conceptualized by Bassnett (1993) as an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural inquiry dedicated to deciphering intricate patterns of literary connectivity across vast spatial and temporal boundaries. This vision was significantly broadened by Remak (1961), who defined comparative literature as an expansive discipline investigating literary phenomena beyond national confines, as well as mapping the fertile intersections between literature and allied domains of human knowledge, philosophy, historical consciousness, and the social sciences. In the contemporary Anthropocene, this intellectual framework has expanded even further to encompass planetary ecological crises, cross-species ethics, and deep historical entanglements across maritime and terrestrial networks (Ghosh, 2021). This methodological openness creates vital space for rigorous scholarly investigations that examine oral vernacular texts not merely as isolated aesthetic objects, but as holistic expressions of human civilization embedded within complex environmental matrices.

Historically, the institutional development of comparative literature was polarized into two dominant paradigms: the French school (emphasizing rigorous bilateral textual filiation and historical-factual source-and-influence studies across national borders) and the American school (championing broader aesthetic analogies between literature, the arts, and intellectual history) (Hutomo, 1993). However, these conventional frameworks have faced rigorous theoretical dismantling by post-European and decolonial scholars. Critics argue that traditional Western comparative models remain deeply entrenched in Eurocentric biases, colonial epistemologies, and hierarchical valuation systems that marginalize indigenous textual traditions (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Responding to these imperial epistemological limitations, Bassnett (1993) and Tyson (2023) formulated a robust post-European comparative literature paradigm. This progressive model insists upon foregrounding suppressed cultural identities, critically interrogating canon formation, accounting for the political ramifications of cultural hegemony, recalibrating historical periodization, and adamantly rejecting ahistorical formalism. For post-colonial societies such as Indonesia, this decolonial methodological shift is indispensable. It provides the theoretical scaffolding necessary to elevate indigenous and regional literatures onto an equal footing within global literary discourse, dismantling long-standing center-periphery dichotomies.

Within the vast archipelago of Indonesian cultural production, oral literature—comprising mythic cycles, heroic legends, etiologic folktales, and ancestral narratives—constitutes an irreplaceable repository of local literary heritage. Regrettably, oral literature has historically suffered severe neglect within mainstream comparative literary scholarship, being frequently dismissed as primitive or folkloric curiosities. Yet,

as contemporary scholarship demonstrates, oral narratives harbor profound philosophical systems, sophisticated aesthetic codes, and enduring pedagogical functions that remain vibrantly operational in contemporary society (Suyadi et al., 2021). Furthermore, oral folktales operate as primary communicative vehicles for transmitting community values, customary jurisprudence, and ecological ethics across generations (Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023).

Padanglawas Regency, situated in the heart of North Sumatra Province, represents an extraordinary geographical and cultural reservoir of oral traditions. Comprehensive archival research conducted by the documentation team of the North Sumatra Provincial Language Center (Suyadi et al., 2021) successfully cataloged at least 16 distinct folktales distributed across five key administrative sub-districts: Barumun, Ulu Barumun, Central Barumun, Huristak, and Lubuk Barumun. These narratives collectively reflect the sublime civilizational achievements of the historical Ulu Barumun and Mandailing Padanglawas communities, encoding rich local wisdom values (*kearifan lokal*) that continue to anchor the ethical character of contemporary inhabitants.

Despite their immense cultural and philosophical wealth, Padanglawas folktales have received surprisingly scant academic attention, particularly within advanced comparative literature frameworks that actively engage contemporary global dynamics. The present study directly addresses this significant scholarly gap by investigating the legendary corpus of Padanglawas through an innovative synthesis of cultural ecology and post-European comparative literature. This dual-lens approach enables an exhaustive textual analysis that conceptualizes folklore not merely as static aesthetic artifacts, but as active, vital components of dynamic socio-ecological and political ecosystems (Buell, 1995; Heise, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Ecology as a Method in Literary Studies

Cultural ecology has emerged as a transformative critical paradigm that conceptualizes literature as an organic cultural product inextricably bound to the natural and social environments in which it germinates and evolves (Buell, 1995). Operating on the foundational premise that imaginative writing mirrors the complex web of interactions between human communities, biophysical surroundings, and symbolic belief systems, cultural ecology provides vital analytical tools for literary ecocriticism. In the specific domain of oral literature, cultural ecology is uniquely indispensable because traditional legends and folktales inherently encode generations of empirical observations regarding environmental resource management, sustainable habitat governance, adaptive social organization, and cosmological frameworks.

Within the Indonesian academic landscape, ecological readings of indigenous oral narratives have gained substantial momentum. Groundbreaking research by Lumako (2024) on the folklore of the *Pamona people in Poso Regency* established that ecological values embedded within oral narratives can be systematically categorized into four distinct relational axes: (1) relational linkages between literature and active nature conservation initiatives, (2) ethical ties connecting literary motifs to human subsistence and communal well-being, (3) normative intersections between oral texts and customary law (*adat*), and (4) cosmological bridges uniting literature with sacred myths and spiritual beliefs. Similarly, Wafi (2024), investigating mythic environmental

stewardship within the folklore of *Sumber Taman Sari in Madura*, demonstrated that oral traditions fulfill vital regulatory functions in safeguarding local ecosystems. These scholarly findings substantiate the assertion that folktales function far beyond mere recreational entertainment, operating instead as sophisticated vehicles for intergenerational ecological pedagogy.

On the international academic frontier, ecocritical scholarship has increasingly probed the intricate intersections of literature, identity, and environmental philosophy. Yusoff and Raihanah (2023) conducted an illuminating ecocritical reading of Kelantanese Malay identity in contemporary fiction, revealing how narrative art articulates nuanced human-environment negotiations under specific cultural pressures. Furthermore, anthropological and literary investigations into oral traditions within climate change discourse in the Sundarbans illustrate how indigenous communities mobilize oral heritage to conceptualize ecological agency as a shared, multispecies phenomenon in the face of anthropogenic environmental catastrophe (Sun, 2022; Nixon, 2013). These international studies reinforce the theoretical necessity of examining traditional texts through an ecological lens, proving that ancient oral narratives offer vital paradigms for addressing contemporary planetary crises (Heise, 2023; Ghosh, 2021).

Post-European Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity

The persistent theoretical inadequacies of traditional French and American comparative literature schools catalyzed the development of post-European comparative literature. As articulated by Bassnett (1993), this paradigm prioritizes the recovery of marginalized cultural identities, critiques the politics of literary canon formation, examines the power dynamics of cultural transfer, and insists upon rigorous historical contextualization while rejecting decontextualized formalist methodologies. Crucially, post-European comparative literature dismantles Eurocentric hierarchies, asserting that literary value cannot be judged solely by Western metropolitan standards (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Within the post-colonial intellectual climate of Indonesia, post-European comparative literature provides essential theoretical space for investigating regional and local literatures that have historically suffered systematic marginalization under Dutch colonial hegemony and post-independence centralist literary policies (Suyadi, 2013; Tyson, 2023). Modern scholars argue that comparative literature must operate dynamically across interdisciplinary boundaries, traversing geographical locations, ethnic identities, and national borders to foster genuine intercultural dialogue. This decolonial turn directly supports contemporary pedagogical reforms aimed at integrating indigenous archives into global literary curricula (Chi Pham et al, 2025).

Oral Literature of Padanglawas: Richness and Study Potential

The oral heritage of Padanglawas Regency represents an exceptional repository of indigenous knowledge and aesthetic expression. Comprehensive documentation projects undertaken by the North Sumatra Provincial Language Center (Suyadi et al., 2021) have revealed a rich tapestry of 16 distinct folklores, capturing the high civilizational attainment of the Mandailing and Ulu Barumun societies. Recent specialized investigations—such as ecocritical analyses of the *Liang Namuap cave*

legend and ecolinguistic studies of flora and fauna lexicons in traditional Mandailing ceremonial practices (*Upah-Upah*) in Matondang Village—confirm that Padanglawas oral texts maintain profound, intricate foundations linking language, culture, and ecology.

METHOD

This investigation adopts a qualitative descriptive methodology grounded in an interpretative-symbolic narrative approach (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). This methodological orientation was selected because it aligns perfectly with the primary research objective: uncovering the deep metaphysical meanings, social values, and ecological codes embedded within Padanglawas legends, while rigorously analyzing how these oral texts negotiate modern global pressures. The primary data corpus comprises 16 folkloric narratives meticulously documented by the research team of the North Sumatra Provincial Language Center (Suyadi et al., 2021), collected directly from five distinct sub-districts within Padanglawas Regency: Barumun, Ulu Barumun, Central Barumun, Huristak, and Lubuk Barumun. The complete textual corpus encompasses: (1) Si Bayo Angin Dohot Si Boru Agian, (2) Hasahatan Tompat Panyahatan, (3) Djandjilobi, (4) Aja Nabontar Namartua, (5) Sibuhuan, (6) Daulat Raja Rayendra Cola I, (7) Bah Rumun, (8) Siti Halus Marbagas Dohot Jihin, (9) Parmata Sapihak, (10) Liang Namuap, (11) Batu Goru-Goru, (12) Kuburan Sembilan Na Jogi, (13) Si Oppung, (14) Anak Boru Na Pauba-Ubahon, (15) Huting, and (16) Luhat Huristak.

Primary empirical data were gathered through intensive field recordings and meticulous transcription of oral performances delivered by native elderly informants fluent in the Ulu Barumun and Mandailing dialects, which were subsequently translated into Indonesian and English (Suyadi et al., 2021). For analytical precision, the Indonesian translations served as the primary working texts. Data analysis was executed by synthesizing a cultural ecology framework (Lumako, 2024; Garrard, 2004) with a post-European comparative literature framework (Bassnett, 1993). The cultural ecology matrix facilitated textual examination across four fundamental dimensions: (1) literature and nature conservation, (2) literature and human social life, (3) literature and customary law (*adat*), and (4) literature and mythic belief systems. Concurrently, the decolonial comparative framework evaluated how local oral texts articulate agency against global homogenization. The analytical procedure followed three strict phases: (1) data reduction (selecting corpus narratives relevant to socio-ecological and decolonial inquiry), (2) data display (organizing narratives into systematic thematic matrices), and (3) conclusion drawing (interpreting findings through established theoretical frameworks). Analytical validity was strictly guaranteed through comprehensive source triangulation, cross-verifying narrative variants across multiple informants and checking internal textual consistency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Rigorous textual analysis of the 16 documented Padanglawas legends reveals that these narratives can be systematically categorized into four primary thematic functions based on their interwoven ecological and cultural dimensions: (1) Legends operating as structural mechanisms of social control and moral guardianship, exemplified

prominently in 'Si Oppung' and 'Parmata Sapihak'. (2) Legends staging ontological negotiations between the supernatural realm and human social reality, embodied in 'Siti Halus' and 'Liang Namuap'. (3) Legends serving as historical archives of pre-modern trans-regional and cross-cultural contact, demonstrated in 'Bah Rumun' and 'Daulat Raja Rayendra Cola I'. (4) Legends embodying indigenous local wisdom in environmental resource governance and sustainable community management, dispersed across narratives such as 'Hasahatan' and 'Luhat Huristak'.

Discussion

Legends as Instruments of Social Control and Moral Guardianship

Among the most compelling narratives within the Padanglawas oral corpus is the legend of 'Si Oppung'. This narrative centers upon a mythical guardian entity manifesting in the terrifying form of a tiger (*harimau*), which materializes whenever community members commit severe moral transgressions or violations of custom within the village. Fascinatingly, from a sociological and political standpoint, Si Oppung does not target the direct individual wrongdoers or petty criminals; instead, its punitive or warning focus is directed squarely at the village leadership—the customary elders (*datuk/pemangku adat*) and the village head (*kepala desa*):

"Jadi i do niparlidungkonsa aso nipadiar na songon i, aso dipadiar dakdanak i mambaean tilako." ("Therefore, that is what was told, why such a thing was permitted, and why the children were permitted to commit immorality.") (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 33)

Interpreted through the theoretical lens of cultural ecology (Garrard, 2004), *Si Oppung* operates as a sophisticated sociopolitical and environmental 'guardian of equilibrium'. When social and moral norms are breached, destabilizing the communal ecosystem, Si Oppung materializes as a stern cosmological warning. By holding community leaders strictly accountable for permissive governance, the legend functions as an indigenous mechanism of structural critique against leadership negligence. The tiger symbolizes supreme spiritual authority and ecological vigilance, reflecting an intimate, non-anthropocentric worldview where human morality and natural integrity are fundamentally interdependent (Heise, 2023). Field interviews confirm that local informants maintain a living, reverent belief in the contemporary presence of Si Oppung, demonstrating that the ecological and ethical imperatives encoded in the legend remain vibrantly functional today (Suyadi et al., 2021):

"Sapetona dongan, au pe na tarbiar do rohangku marjamitahon harani jebuna boti leng adong dope lopus sannari." ("Actually, I am a little afraid to tell it, because in my opinion it is very terrifying, and it still exists even now") (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 34)

Similarly, the *Legend of Parmata Sapihak* ('the one-eyed figure') enforces strict social control and ecological sanctity surrounding ancestral gravesites. The sacred tomb of Parmata Sapihak—characterized by the absence of inscribed names or dates and dimensions exceeding normal human proportions (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 43)—serves as a focal point for communal vows and spiritual petitions. Violations of this sacred space, such as an errant child removing a stone from the megalithic structure, result in severe supernatural afflictions (madness) that can only be cured through ritual repentance and the restitution of the stolen geological element:

"Nakkon pola niubati, hum nipualak pe batu i boti marsantabi, sodar ma ia mangulahi." ("Do not treat it with any kind of medicine, except to return the stone and apologize, and he will regain consciousness.") (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 44)

This narrative effectively instills deep intergenerational reverence for ancestral heritage and sacred landscapes, reinforcing ecological preservation and customary jurisprudence.

Legends as a Negotiation Between the Supernatural World and Social Reality

The legends of *Siti Halus* and *Liang Namuap* articulate profound ontological negotiations between human society and the supernatural realm (Bassnett, 1993). The legend of *Siti Halus* narrates the extraordinary union between a princess of King Bulung Botik and a supernatural spirit being (*alak halus*), attracted by her pristine physical beauty devoid of any blemishes or moles (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 29):

"Siti Halus on marbagas rap alak halus, harani jogina boti tompana bou sada suada martamburlonga." ("This Siti Halus was married by a supernatural being; because of her beauty, she had no moles.") (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 29)

This inter-realm marital alliance transcends pure fantasy, reflecting an indigenous cosmological paradigm where physical human domains and spiritual ecosystems coexist in continuous dialogue. Siti Halus's mountain summit grave remains an active, revered pilgrimage site, sustaining spiritual continuity across centuries (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 29):

"Madung on marratus taon nisiarahi halak jojor taon." ("For hundreds of years, people have made annual pilgrimages to this place.") (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 29)

Similarly, the legend of *Liang Namuap* ('Fragrant Cave') portrays a supernatural subterranean kingdom ruled by a jinn prince enamored with Sende Halus, a Hasibuan princess celebrated for her *'sambilan jogi'* (ninefold beauty) (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 45). This cross-entity alliance secures spiritual protection for the neighboring village of Parapat. Within post-European comparative frameworks, these narratives validate non-Western epistemologies, empowering local cultures to resist Eurocentric rationalism and assert authentic identity through indigenous cosmology (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Legends as a History of Intercultural Contact

The legends of *Bah Rumun* and *Daulat Raja Rayendra Cola I* document extensive pre-modern trans-regional connectivity between the Indonesian Archipelago and South Asia (Ghosh, 2024). The etymology of Barumun originates from 'Bah Rumun' ('what a bustling crowd'), an exclamation uttered by Toba migrants arriving in Padanglawas (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 41). The Barumun River served as a vital arterial water transportation route supporting the historical Aru Barumun Sultanate—recognized as one of the earliest Islamic political entities in Sumatra. Furthermore, the legend of *Daulat Raja Rayendra Cola I* commemorates the 11th-century imperial expedition of King Rajendra Chola I from Tanjore, South India, who navigated the Aru Barumun estuary around 1025–1030 AD, conquering Srivijaya and subjugating regional polities along the Barumun basin. Extensive archaeological remains (temples/*biaro* and stupas) discovered along the riverbanks corroborate these oral archives (Suyadi et al., 2021, pp. 40–41). These historical legends prove conclusively that Padanglawas was never an

isolated hinterland, but an active participant in global maritime trade and cultural networks long before modern globalization (Remak, 1961).

Legend as Local Wisdom in Managing the Environment and Resources

Padanglawas legends articulate sophisticated ecological resource governance and sustainable community management. The *Hasahatan legend* details a designated communal repository for agricultural and plantation produce (*panyahatan*) that evolved into a permanent settlement, illustrating organized collective resource stewardship (Suyadi et al., 2021, p. 35). Similarly, the legend of Luhat Huristak explains the etymological origin of Huristak from the exclamation 'hu rittak' ('I pull it!') uttered by Ompu Sohataon's warriors when they simultaneously pulled opposing ends of a giant rattan vine (Suyadi et al., 2021, pp. 53–54). While deceptively simple, this narrative encodes vital principles of cooperative labor, inter-group communication, and sustainable environmental resource harvesting. Cultural ecology demonstrates that such oral traditions function as vital repositories of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), ensuring intergenerational environmental conservation and social solidarity (Lumako, 2024; Nixon, 2013).

Implications for Teaching Comparative Literature

The theoretical and empirical findings of this research offer profound pedagogical implications for comparative literature education. First, regional oral literature such as Padanglawas legends provides highly contextual, engaging learning materials that resonate directly with students' lived cultural realities. Second, integrating cultural ecology equips learners with interdisciplinary analytical tools to examine texts beyond formalist aesthetics, engaging political and ecological functions. Third, the post-European comparative framework empowers students to recognize indigenous literary heritage as an active, equal participant in world literature, echoing Suyadi (2013) regarding the absolute necessity of defending national and local literature against global cultural homogenization and supporting decolonized curricula (Chi Pham et al, 2025; Tyson, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive investigation demonstrates conclusively that Padanglawas legends transcend archaic folkloric relics, functioning instead as living socio-ecological laboratories that mirror complex, dynamic relations between humanity, nature, and political power (Heise, 2023). These oral narratives fulfill vital biocultural functions: acting as structural mechanisms for social control and moral governance ('Si Oppung', 'Parmata Sapihak'), mediating cosmological boundaries between human society and spiritual realms ('Siti Halus', 'Liang Namuap'), archiving pre-modern trans-regional connectivities ('Bah Rumun', 'Daulat Raja Rayendra Cola I'), and codifying indigenous wisdom in sustainable resource management ('Hasahatan', 'Luhat Huristak') (Buell, 1995; Ghosh, 2021). Within a post-European comparative literature paradigm (Bassnett, 1993; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), Padanglawas oral heritage asserts autonomous indigenous epistemologies that successfully challenge Western literary hegemony. Local literature is not a passive subordinate awaiting external validation, but an active agent forging ecological awareness and cultural resilience against planetary

homogenization. Consequently, integrating regional oral traditions into comparative literature education strengthens national cultural agency, perfectly realizing the visionary theme of the 35th HISKI KIK 2026 conference: 'Indonesian Literature as a Citizen of World Literature'. Future scholarly endeavors should expand ecocritical investigations to encompass broader regional oral archives across Sumatra and develop innovative pedagogical models grounded in indigenous ecological wisdom.

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