PROCEEDINGS
International Conference on Literature
Himpunan Sarjana-Kesusastraan Indonesia (HISKI)
E-ISSN 2988-4357

The ecological ontology of *Balum Beudé* in Acehnese children's stories: Universal motifs and the contribution of local literature to world literature

Rismawati[1*], Wiyatmi[2], Sudiati[3]
[1,2,3]Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Email: [1]rismawati@utu.ac.id,[2]wiyatmi@uny.ac.id, [3]sudiati@uny.ac.id

Abstract: *Balum Beudé is a mythological entity in Acehnese children's stories that represents the relationship between humans and the aquatic environment. In Acehnese children's stories, this figure serves not only as a frightening character but also as a medium for passing down ecological wisdom that shapes the community's perspective on nature. This study examines the ecological ontology in the representation of Balum Beudé using a comparative literature approach and an ecological ontological perspective. This study compares Balum Beudé with similar motifs such as Kappa (Japan), the Kelpie (Scotland), the Rusalka (Slavic), and Mami Wata (Africa) to highlight both their commonalities and local distinctiveness. The findings reveal that Balum Beudé is not merely a local cultural heritage but part of a network of universal motifs that document the relationship between humans and nature. Through this lens, Acehnese children's stories contribute to the global literary discourse by offering an ecological epistemology rooted in the local wisdom of the Nusantara. Thus, Acehnese local literature can be viewed as an active participant in the dynamics of transnational literature.*

Keywords: *Balum Beudé, ecological ontology, Acehnese children's stories, universal motifs, comparative literature*

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature across cultures does not merely serve as entertainment or a means of instilling fear; it also functions as a medium for transmitting cosmological values, social ethics, and ecological awareness (Chawla, 2009; Sobel, 2025; Berkes, 2017; Aghasaleh, 2019). In Aceh, one entity that lives on in oral tradition and is frequently recounted to children is *Balum Beudé* (also known as *Balum Bili, Baluem Beudé*, or *Baluem Bidi*). This figure is described as a supernatural being that guards bodies of water such as rivers, estuaries, and coastal areas. *Balum Beudé* is known in Acehnese oral tradition as a supernatural guardian of waterways, estuaries, and rivers. In local collective imagination, the form of *Balum Beudé* is most often described as a roll or sheet of red mat, the color of fire, floating on the water's surface to lure and ensnare its victims (Safriadi, 2019; Sufi et al., 1998). In a number of Acehnese oral narratives, *Balum Beudé* is also believed capable of disguising itself as drifting wood or a freshwater turtle (*labi-labi*). Its presence is often linked to dangerous natural phenomena such as whirlpools and drowning incidents, and it has come to serve as an ecological marker indicating that a river has become polluted (Snouck Hurgronje, 1906). The term *Balum Beudé* itself, in the Acehnese language, also refers to a hazardous point in a body of water, such as a deep trench or hollow at the riverbed capable of producing a lethal whirlpool (Daud, 1999).

Research on Acehnese children's stories featuring *Balum Beudé* remains relatively limited compared with studies of classical Acehnese *hikayat* or *syair*. Most

*Corresponding author
How to cite (APA 7th): Rismawati, Wiyatmi, & Sudiati. (2026). The ecological ontology of *Balum Beudé* in Acehnese children stories: Universal motifs and the contribution of local literature to world literature. *Proceedings 35th KIK, 35*, 913–929. https://doi.org/10.68634/kik.v35i.94

accounts of this creature still circulate at the level of urban legend or orally transmitted stories passed informally from parents to children as a means of moral education and local wisdom (Hermansyah, 2015). Yet the representation of *Balum Beudé* carries rich layers of meaning: it is not merely a fearsome figure meant to keep children away from dangerous rivers, but also a medium that articulates the ontological relationship between humans and the aquatic environment. From the perspective of ecological ontology, such a figure records the way a community views nature not as a passive object but as an empowered entity possessing agency and demanding respect (Ingold, 2021). Nature, in this view, is not merely a backdrop or a resource, but a subject that interacts with humans within a complex web of relations.

At the global levels, motifs of water spirits of water ghosts are widespread and form a network of universal motifs. The kappa in Japan is depicted as a river creature about the size of a child, characterized by a water-filled hollow on its head (sara); it can drag humans and animals into the water, but in some stories, it also teaches the art of bone healing after being defeated (Foster, 2015; Child, n.d.). The Kelpie in Scotland appears as a beautiful, enticing water-horse that lures people, especially children and travelers into riding it before dragging its victims to the depths of a lake or river and drowning them (Briggs, 1976). The Rusalka in Slavic tradition is the spirit of a young woman who died before her time, often through drowning or suicide, who appears in spring to dance at the water's edge and sometimes lures men into the river (Propp, 1968; Zelenin, 1991). Meanwhile, Mami Wata in West Africa and the African diaspora is a water goddess or spirit possessing a dual nature, bestowing wealth, fertility, and healing while simultaneously demanding loyalty and sacrifice (Drewal, 2008). This cross-cultural comparison allows *Balum Beudé* to be read not as an isolated local phenomenon but as part of a network of motifs that record humanity's experience in confronting the unpredictable, and often lethal, forces of nature.

This research arises from the urgency of situating Acehnese local literature within the conversation of world literature (Damrosch, 2003; Casanova, 2004). By examining the ecological ontology contained in representations of *Balum Beudé* and comparing it with similar motifs across various traditions, this study aims to demonstrate that Acehnese children's stories contribute an ecological epistemology that is both distinctive and universal. The novelty of this study lies in its effort to connect Acehnese children's folklore with the frameworks of ecological ontology and comparative literature (Ingold, 2021; Descola, 2013), so that local literature is read not merely as heritage to be preserved but as an active contributor to transnational discourse on the human–nature relationship. Amid the current global ecological crisis, voices from local traditions that have long negotiated their relationship with the environment become increasingly relevant to hear and study (Berkes, 2017; Whyte, 2017).

Although the figure of *Balum Beudé* has long been embedded in Acehnese oral traditions and has frequently served as a means of moral education for children, in-depth scholarly investigations of this figure remain limited. Most existing accounts are largely confined to documenting urban legends or providing basic folkloristic descriptions, primarily emphasizing its function as a cautionary figure used to frighten children away from dangerous rivers (Hermansyah, 2015). One aspect that has not been adequately explored is how representations of *Balum Beudé* embody the ecological

ontology of Acehnese society, that is, a worldview in which rivers, estuaries, and the sea are perceived not merely as passive objects but as agentive entities that demand respect and reflect reciprocal relationships between humans and aquatic environments (Ingold, 2021; Descola, 2013).

Previous studies have also rarely examined *Balum Beudé* within the interconnected frameworks of written children's literature and oral tradition, leaving unexplored how this narrative functions both as an oral heritage and as a text circulating within children's educational contexts. Accordingly, this study explicitly addresses three research questions: (1) How is *Balum Beudé* represented in Acehnese children's stories, both those transmitted orally and those that have been rewritten? (2) What forms of ecological ontology are embedded in these representations? and (3) How is *Balum Beudé* situated within the global network of water-spirit motifs when compared with the kappa, kelpie, rusalka, and Mami Wata?

From a comparative perspective, *Balum Beudé*, *the kappa, kelpie, rusalka*, and *Mami Wata* share similar functions as markers of aquatic hazards and mediators of human nature relationships. These figures possess the ability to draw victims into the water and are frequently associated with drowning-related deaths (Briggs, 1976; Foster, 2015; Propp, 1968; Drewal, 2008). However, significant differences can be observed in their physical forms, characteristics, and social functions. The Japanese kappa is depicted as a small, childlike creature with a water-filled depression on its head. Although potentially ferocious, it may also impart knowledge of bone-healing techniques after being defeated (Foster, 2015; Child, n.d.). The Scottish kelpie appears as a beautiful and alluring water horse that deliberately deceives victims into riding it before dragging them into the depths (Briggs, 1976). In Slavic traditions, the rusalka is the spirit of a young woman who died prematurely, often through drowning or suicide. It appears seasonally and is more strongly associated with erotic allure (Propp, 1968; Zelenin, 1991). Mami Wata, found in West African and diasporic traditions, exhibits a pronounced dual nature, bestowing wealth, fertility, and healing while simultaneously demanding loyalty and sacrifice (Drewal, 2008). In contrast, *Balum Beudé* is more commonly depicted as a rolled-up or unfolded bright-red mat, a piece of driftwood, or a softshell turtle. Its presence is specifically associated with hazardous locations in rivers, such as deep holes and whirlpools, and is also interpreted as an indication of river pollution (Safriadi, 2019; Sufi et al., 1998; Snouck Hurgronje, 1906; Daud, 1999). Thus, *Balum Beudé* functions not merely as a deadly water spirit but also as a local ecological indicator that reflects the community's awareness of aquatic environmental conditions.

The novelty of this study lies in its application of the concept of ecological ontology (Ingold, 2021; Descola, 2013) to the study of Acehnese folklore and children's literature. Through this theoretical framework, *Balum Beudé* is no longer interpreted merely as a frightening mythical creature but rather as an articulation of local epistemologies concerning human–nature relationships in which nature is understood to possess agency. This approach also situates Acehnese children's literature within the broader discourse of world literature (Damrosch, 2003; Casanova, 2004), demonstrating how local narratives can make distinctive yet universally relevant epistemological contributions to global discussions on the ecological crisis and the ways in which humans negotiate with unpredictable forces of nature (Berkes, 2012; Whyte, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecological Ontology and the Representation of the Non-Human

Ecological ontology refres to a worldview that rejects a rigid dichotomy between humans and nature and recognizes that non-human beings, whether animals, plants, or spiritual entities hold an ontological status equal to that of humans within the web of life (Descola, 2013; Ingold, 2021). This perspective emerged from a critique of modern anthropocentrism, which places humans at the center and as masters of nature. Thought tradition such as new animism (Bird-David, 1999); (Harvey, 2005), Amazonian perspectivism as developed by Philippe Descola dan Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Descola, 2013); (De Castro, 2012), and literary ecocritism provide the theoretical foundation for a more equitable reading of non-human entities. Within this framework, mythological beings are no longer read merely as symbols or psychological projections of humans, but as representations of how a community understands existence and the relations between entities in the world.

Tim Ingold, in several of his works on dwelling and being alive, emphasizes that humans and non-humans continuously shape one another in an ongoing process of living (Ingold, 2021). Nature is not a passive backdrop against which humans act, but a bundle of intersecting lines of life. Within the context of oral literature, figures such as *Balum Beudé* can be read as an acknowledgement of non-human lines of line that possess their own paths and will. When a story teaches children not to approach a particular river trench, what is "inhabitant" who was present there long before.

In oral traditions and children's stories of many cultures, supernatural beings of particular places often function as boundary-keepers between the human world and other realms, while also serving as reminders of human limitation in the face of natural forces. *Balum Beudé*, with its habitat in dangerous waters, articulates such boundaries. Its presence marks locations that must not be entered carelessly, while also affirming that water is not merely a resource to be exploited but a space in habited by other forces possessing their own will and demands. The ontology emerging from this representation is relational in nature: humans and non-human beings share the same space, and any transgression of that spatial boundary carries fatal consequences for the transgressor (Ingold, 2021); (Descola, 2013).

Universal Motifs of Water Spirits in World Literature

The motif of dangerous or ambivalent water creatures appears across many cultures with a striking and recurring pattern. The Kappa (Japan) is depicted as a child-sized creature with a turtle-like shell, webbed feet, and a water-filled depression (sara) on its head that serves as its source of power, if the water in this depression spills, the Kappa becomes weak (Foster, 2015); (Child, n.d.). The Kappa story serves a dual function: as a warning to keep children from playing in dangerous rivers, and as a narrative about the possibility of negotiating with non-human beings, a defeated Kappa may teach the art of medicine or promise never to trouble the village again (Foster, 2015). In some parts of Japan, "no swimming" signs are still accompanied by images of the Kappa.

The Kelpie in Scottish folklore most often appears as a beautiful horse, usually black or grey, standing at the edge of a lake or river. Once someone mounts it, the horse's skin becomes as sticky as glue and the victim cannot dismount; the Kelpie then carries

its rider into the depths and drowns them (Briggs, 1976). In some versions, the Kelpie can transform into a human, often bearing telltale signs such as horse hooves or wet hair. This motif is especially strong in a land rich with deep lochs and swift rivers; the Kelpie story became a cultural technology for explaining and preventing deaths by drowning. Robert Burns even mentions *water-kelpies* in his poetry as agents of dark power (Burns, 2025).

The Rusalka in Eastern and Southern Slavic tradition has a complex history. In the pre-Christian period, Rusalki were associated with fertility and the moisture that brought life to the fields (Propp, 1968). Following Christian influence, the Rusalka became increasingly identified with the spirit of a woman who died an unnatural death by drowning, suicide out of despair, or murder, becoming a restless spirit (Zelenin, 1991). They appear especially during Rusalka Week (around Pentecost), dancing at riversides and among willow trees, and are said to be able to drag enticed men into the water. The Rusalka carries a strong emotional and gendered charge, while also affirming the danger of water and the boundary between the world of the living and the dead.

Mami Wata (*Mother Water*) is a widespread complex of water spirits found across West and Central Africa and the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean. She is often depicted as a beautiful, long-haired woman, sometimes half-fish, who dwells in a lavish underwater world (Drewal, 2008). Mami Wata can grant wealth, fertility, and healing power to her followers, but she demands absolute loyalty and sometimes sacrifice. Her dual nature, giving while demanding, alluring while dangerous, reflects the ambivalence of water as both a source of life and death. In contemporary contexts, Mami Wata has also become a symbol of resistance, identity, and negotiation with modernity (Drewal, 2008).

The structural similarities among these motifs indicate that people across different parts of the world confront a similar experience: water is both a source of life and an unpredictable threat of death. Narratives about water spirits function as a cultural technology for managing fear, teaching caution to younger generations, and negotiating a relationship with an environment that cannot be fully controlled. At the same time, each tradition adds its own local distinctiveness, form, behavior, gender, and attached moral values, reflecting the ecological, social, and historical conditions of its community. This comparison provides the foundation for reading *Balum Beudé* as a local variation within a network of universal motifs.

Children's stories and the Transmission of Ecological Wisdom

Stories addressed to children carry a particularly strong pedagogical function, as they are conveyed at the very stage when a worldview is being formed (Chawla, 2009); (Sobel, 2025). Through frightening figures such as *Balum Beudé*, adults instill boundaries between safe and unsafe spaces without always needing to provide elaborate rational explanations. Children learn that a particular river is "inhabited" and must not be entered. Yet behind this frightening function lies a deeper layer of ecological wisdom: respect for dangerous places, an awareness that nature possesses a power deserving of respect, and, in contemporary versions, an understanding that pollution can "awaken" or draw the attention of the guardian being (Berkes, 2017); (Ingold, 2021).

Within the Acehnese context, rich in oral tradition and in Islamic values coexisting alongside local beliefs, stories about *Balum Beudé* become an arena for

negotiation among the sacred, the social, and the ecological (Abdullah, 2006). Acehnese communities live in a region crossed by numerous rivers and bordered by the sea; experiences of drowning and flooding are part of collective memory. The *Balum Beudé* story processes such experiences into a narrative that can be passed down across generations. At the same time, this story does not directly contradict religious teaching, but instead lives in a parallel space as practical wisdom about how to behave in nature.

Research on children's literature and ecology has grown considerably over the past decade. Researchers have shown that children's stories can be an effective medium for cultivating environmental awareness from an early age (Aghasaleh, 2019); (Chawla, 2009). However, most studies still focus on modern written children's literature. Studies of traditional oral stories that contain ecological wisdom, such as *Balum Beudé*, are still rarely conducted systematically, let alone within a cross-cultural comparative framework. This study aims to fill that gap.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach within a comparative literature framework combined with an ecological ontology perspective (Creswell, 2016; Descola, 2013; (Ingold, 2021). The comparative literature approach was chosen because it allows a local phenomenon to be situated within a broader network of motifs, thereby bringing both its distinctiveness and its shared features into sharper view (Damrosch, 2003). The ecological ontology perspective is used as a lens through which to read representations of *Balum Beudé* not merely as a story character, but as an articulation of how a community understands existence and the relations among entities in the world (Ingold, 2021); De Castro, 2012).

The data sources for this study are limited to two illustrated children's storybooks published by Balai Bahasa Aceh in 2025 that explicitly feature the figure of *Balum Beudé*: Balum Bili Sang Plisi Ie by Husna M. Zein and Jana Syafira Jarjani, and *Baluem Bude Hantu Laut* by Cut Ida Agustina. These two books were selected using a random sampling technique from a corpus of 150 children's storybook titles published by Balai Bahasa Aceh between 2021 and 2025. The selection criteria focused on books addressing environmental themes and distinctive regional characteristics, particularly those related to aquatic environments, local supernatural beings, and ecological messages intended for child readers. Secondary data consist of folkloric descriptions of the kappa, kelpie, rusalka, and Mami Wata drawn from established ethnographic sources and comparative studies (Briggs, 1976; Drewal, 2008; Foster, 2015). Journalistic reports and modern literary works referencing *Balum Beudé* were used solely to provide contextual background and were not included in the primary analytical corpus.

Data were collected through systematic literature searches, documentation of published and media-reported oral stories, and examination of visual and narrative representations in the digital public sphere, with primary sources limited to Acehnese children's literature published between 2021 and 2025. Following Miles and Huberman's procedures, each storybook was read repeatedly to identify narrative sequences, character descriptions, visual elements, and moral or ecological messages linked to *Balum Beudé*; relevant excerpts and illustrations were then documented, coded, and categorized by recurring motifs, ontological relationships, and pedagogical

functions. Analysis proceeded in two stages: first, a textual and contextual examination of the representations to uncover the underlying ontological structure (who is considered to exist, how relations among entities are portrayed, what values are transmitted to children, and how the figure regulates behavior in aquatic spaces); second, a comparative analysis of motif patterns, pedagogical functions, moral ambivalence, and ecological implications across the traditions examined.

Data analysis was conducted in two interrelated stages. The first stage involved textual and contextual analyses of the two primary storybooks to uncover the ontological structures surrounding *Balum Beudé*: which entities are attributed existence and agency, how human-nonhuman relationships are represented, what values are transmitted to child readers, and how this figure functions to regulate behavior in aquatic environments. The second stage involved comparative analysis based on four explicitly defined indicators: (1) physical form and modes of manifestation, (2) modes of interaction with humans (enticing, warning, punishing, or protecting), (3) moral or pedagogical ambivalence, and (4) ecological implications (whether the figure serves as a marker of environmental hazards, pollution, or reciprocal human–nature relationships). These indicators enabled a systematic comparison of *Balum Beudé* with the kappa, kelpie, rusalka, and Mami Wata while maintaining sensitivity to local cultural specificities.

The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through source triangulation. The descriptions and functions of *Balum Beudé* in the two primary storybooks were cross-examined against each other and secondary ethnographic references to identify both consistencies and variations. Differences in the portrayal of *Balum Beudé* between the two books were treated as productive variations rather than contradictions and were analyzed to explore shifts in the representation of this figure in contemporary Acehnese children's literature. The main limitation of this study lies in its exclusive reliance on written and published sources, as no interviews or direct fieldwork were conducted. Consequently, the analysis does not claim to capture the full spectrum of living oral traditions within Acehnese communities. Nevertheless, the selected written corpus was considered sufficient to examine the ontological and comparative dimensions of *Balum Beudé* as represented in contemporary formally published children's literature (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The examination of *Balum Beudé's* representation in Acehnese children's stories, and its comparison with similar motifs, yields several key findings. First, *Balum Beudé* serves a dual function in narratives addressed to children: as a fear-inducing figure that discourages approach to dangerous waters, and as an ecological marker indicating that a location holds a power deserving of respect (Kompas.com, n.d.; Sentinel, n.d.); lihat juga (Foster, 2015; Berkes, 2017). Second, the most consistent form is that of a red mat, either rolled up or spread out floating on the water; this is a distinctive local feature that sets it apart from similar motifs in other cultures, while also facilitating the identification and oral transmission of stories (Kompas.com, n.d.; Sentinel, n.d.). Third, in several contemporary versions, the presence of *Balum Beudé* is linked to river pollution, transforming this being into a kind of environmental moral guardian that "appears"

when ecological balance is disrupted (Sentinel, n.d.). Fourth, comparison with the Kappa, Kelpie, Rusalka, and Mami Wata reveals a strong universal pattern: the unpredictable danger of water, the ambivalence of water creatures (frightening yet sometimes helpful or giving), and a pedagogical function that instills caution (Briggs, 1976; Drewal, 2008; Foster, 2015; Propp, 1968). At the same time, each tradition possesses its own distinctiveness in form, gender, moral nuance, and socio-historical context. Fifth, Acehnese children's stories featuring *Balum Beudé* contribute to world literature by offering a model for transmitting ecological wisdom through simple yet meaning-dense narratives, while also expanding the map of universal water-spirit motifs with a voice from the Nusantara (Damrosch, 2003; Ingold, 2021).

In the children's storybook *Balumbili* Sang Plisi I by Zein & Jarjani, *Balum Beudé* (referred to as Balumbili) is explicitly portrayed as a supernatural guardian of aquatic environments. Its primary physical form is described as a large, square mat spread widely across the water. Din tells his friends:

> "*Balumbili* looks like a square mat, spread out very wide. At one corner are its two red eyes, while another corner flutters above the water. It lives in whirlpools. It also dwells in deep, blue-colored waters." (p. 4)

Its habitat encompasses hazardous aquatic environments, including rivers, whirlpools (meupuséng), deep blue sections of rivers, mangrove forests, estuaries, the sea, and even old wells. This creature functions as a "water police officer," maintaining order in rivers to prevent children from drowning and to protect waterways from environmental degradation. Its representation is ambivalent: frightening when rules are violated, yet protective when humans show respect for nature. The concluding section of the book emphasizes that the name *Balumbili* remains embedded in Acehnese society and is associated with various dangerous aquatic locations (p. 40).

Variations in its representation emerge throughout the narrative. *Balumbili* is believed to be capable of "taking" individuals who violate established rules, such as swimming at prohibited times, littering, indiscriminately cutting down trees, or disturbing other creatures. However, within this story, such threats function primarily as a means of moral and ecological education rather than as depictions of a physically manifested being that actually appears and preys upon humans.

Balumbili is explicitly employed as a medium of moral and ecological education for children. Through the character of Din, who frightens his friends by recounting stories told by his grandmother, the narrative conveys several behavioral guidelines concerning aquatic environments, (1) Children should acquire swimming skills as a precaution against potential accidents. (2) Children must obtain parental permission and should not visit aquatic environments solely in the company of other children; adult supervision is necessary. (3) Time spent playing in rivers should be restricted: children are discouraged from playing during the midday rest period or approaching the Maghrib prayer time. (4) Children are expected to protect animals and the surrounding natural environment, as environmental destruction may ultimately have adverse consequences for themselves (p. 41, Moral Message).

Issues of pollution and environmental degradation are concretely illustrated in several scenes. When Ki throws a used plastic drinking cup into the river, Din immediately reprimands him:

> "Hey, Ki! Don't litter!"
> Din then insists that Ki retrieve the discarded cup, emphasizing that "this mangrove forest is no place for fooling around" (p. 34).
> The cutting of nipa palm fronds is also associated with the risk of landslides and Balumbili's anger. Uncle Daud advises the children against acting recklessly in the mangrove forest, warning them about the presence of venomous animals and emphasizing that "if we fail to behave ethically toward animals, we will ultimately harm ourselves" (p. 24). Furthermore, the children are encouraged to replant drifting mangrove fruits so that they can provide habitats for fish, prevent erosion, and improve air quality (pp. 32–33). Thus, Balumbili functions both as a local ecological indicator and as a pedagogical medium through which environmental conservation values are internalized by child readers.

Results of the Comparative Analysis of Universal Motifs and Ecological Dimensions

The comparison was conducted based on four predefined indicators: (1) physical form and modes of manifestation, (2) modes of interaction with humans, (3) moral and pedagogical ambivalence, and (4) ecological implications.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Universal Motifs and Ecological Dimensions of *Balum Beudé* with Kappa, Kelpie, Rusalka, and Mami Wata

Indicators	Balum Beudé (Aceh)	Kappa (Japan)	Kelpie (Scotland)	Rusalka (Slavic)	Mami Wata (West Africa & the Diaspora)
Form and Appearance	A large, square mat with red eyes at one corner, fluttering on the water's surface; inhabits whirlpools and deep blue waters.	A small, childlike creature with a water-filled depression (sara) on its head.	A beautiful and alluring water horse.	The spirit of a young woman (often a victim of drowning or suicide) that appears seasonally near bodies of water.	A beautiful female figure (often depicted as half-human, half-fish) adorned in luxurious attire.
Mode of Interaction	Frightens and "takes" those who violate rules; offers protection when rules are respected.	May drag humans into the water but can also impart knowledge of bone-healing techniques after being defeated.	Deliberately deceives individuals into riding it before dragging them into deep water.	Seduces individuals, often through erotic allure, before dragging them into rivers.	Bestows wealth, fertility, and healing while demanding loyalty and sacrifice.
Moral and Pedagogical Ambivalence	Highly pronounced: functions as a pedagogical tool for teaching children about parental permission, appropriate times for aquatic activities, and environmental protection.	Ambivalent, combining potential danger with the transmission of medical knowledge.	Predominantly negative and associated with fatal encounters.	Ambivalent, combining beauty and deadly danger; associated with premature death.	Highly ambivalent, combining blessings with demanding obligations.
Ecological Implications	Serves as a marker of hazardous rivers and a means of internalizing environmental conservation values, including preventing pollution, discouraging indiscriminate tree cutting, and promoting mangrove planting.	Associated with rivers and rice paddies; occasionally symbolizes fertility.	Associated with dangerous lakes and rivers.	Associated with aquatic environments and springtime death.	Associated with water, fertility, and spiritual relationships between humans and nature.
Indicators	Balum Beudé (Aceh)	Kappa (Japan)	Kelpie (Scotland)	Rusalka (Slavic)	Mami Wata (West Africa & the Diaspora)

Balumbili most closely resembles the kappa in terms of its pedagogical function, particularly in regulating children's behavior in aquatic environments, while exhibiting a more explicit ecological dimension than the kelpie and rusalka. Unlike Mami Wata, whose narratives emphasize personal–spiritual relationships involving wealth and loyalty, Balumbili places greater emphasis on communal ethics and the everyday management of aquatic spaces. Beyond the previously presented descriptions of its physical form and moral messages, the concluding passage of the story underscores the continuity of this tradition:

> "Such is the story of Balumbili. To this day, the name *Balumbili* continues to be passed down orally among Acehnese communities. … Be careful! Remember, the *Balumbili* water police are watching!" (p. 40).

Thus, the representation presented in this book not only preserves traditional folkloric motifs but also actively reconstructs Balumbili as a "water police officer" whose role remains relevant to character education and the development of ecological awareness among contemporary Acehnese children.

Discussion

Ecological Ontology in the Representation of Balum Beudé

In stories told to Acehnese children, *Balum Beudé* is not depicted merely as an evil spirit to be destroyed. It is a rightful inhabitant of a particular aquatic space. The places it inhabits, such as deep trenches, river whirlpools, and dangerous estuaries, are regarded as having an "owner" who must not be disturbed carelessly (Kompas.com, n.d.; Sentinel, n.d.). This representation aligns with the concept of *place spirits*, or guardians of place, found in animist and relational-ontology traditions, in which non-human beings are viewed as the rightful owners of a space that demands respect (Bird-David, 1999; Strang, 2024).

The ontology that emerges from this representation is a relational ontology: humans and non-human beings share the same space, and any transgression of that spatial boundary carries fatal consequences (Ingold, 2021; Descola, 2013). Children are taught not to swim in certain locations not only because of physically dangerous current, but also because another entity holds a claim to that space and can "take" a person who enters without permission.

In the ecological ontology that emerges from both children's stories, aquatic space is not regarded as an empty domain that humans may enter at will. Rivers and the sea are understood as already inhabited spaces. *Balum Beudé* is not merely a guardian spirit, but the embodiment of a territorial claim over that space. When a child enters a whirlpool or a deep section of the river without permission, whether parental permission or the tacit "permission" of the water's guardian, the act is perceived as a transgression of relational boundaries. As a consequence, the transgressor may be "taken." This indicates that, within the local worldview, human safety depends on the recognition of non-human entities that hold legitimate claims to aquatic space.

The floating red mat on water is intriguing from a semiotic and cultural perspective. The mat (tika) in Acehnese culture, and more broadly in Malay culture, is an everyday object closely tied to the human body; a seat, a sleeping mat, a surface for

receiving guests, and even a ritual surface in a number of ceremonies. When the mat "comes alive" and floats on the river as the form of a supernatural being, a familiar domestic object turns into a marker of an unfamiliar and threatening presence (Kompas.com, n.d.; Sentinel, n.d.). This transformation affirms that danger can arise from what appears ordinary and close at hand. In some stories, *Balum Beudé* also disguises itself as driftwood or a freshwater turtle (labi-labi), demonstrating a capacity for mimicry that makes it even harder to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. Children are taught to be wary of objects floating in the river, not only because they can be physically dangerous, but also because they might be manifestations of guardian spirits.

Furthermore, in contemporary accounts appearing in the media and in public discourse, *Balum Beudé* is sometimes linked to conditions of river pollution or disturbance. Its presence becomes a warning that humans have violated the balance with the environment (Sentinel, n.d.). Here, the mythological being functions as a moral-ecological indicator: nature "speaks" through a figure that is feared. When a river becomes dirty or is overexploited, the guardian is thought to become more active or more easily "awakened." This perspective aligns with ecological ontology thinking, which views nature as an empowered subject rather than a passive object (Ingold, 2021; Berkes, 2017). Humans do not only act upon nature, but nature also responds and demands respect.

In the short story "Baluembidi" written by Putra Hidayatullah, the *Balum Beudé* motif undergoes an intriguing transformation of meaning. The water creature ordinarily associated with natural danger is turned into a metaphor for human violence, specifically violence within the context of conflict that "drowns" people and conceals bodies in the river (Hidayatullah, 2024). This transformation demonstrates the motif's flexibility: *Balum Beudé* can be used to speak of danger arising from nature as well as danger arising from fellow human beings. In both cases, the river becomes a space that holds secrets and demands caution.

Similarities and Differences with Universal Motifs

The similarity between *Balum Beudé* and water-spirit motifs in other cultures lies in a very strong shared function: marking the danger of water and teaching caution to younger generations (Foster, 2015; Briggs, 1976). The Kappa in Japan is explicitly used in warning signs at rivers and ponds, the Kappa story form part of children's informal education about the dangers of water (Foster, 2015; Child, n.d.). The Kelpie in Scotland, in the form of an enticing horse, emphasizes the danger of water that appears calm and beautiful yet is deadly, an important lesson in a land rich with deep lakes and rivers with sudden currents (Briggs, 1976). The Rusalka teacher the boundary between the world of the living and the dead, while also warning of the risk of drowning and the temptation that comes from the water's edge (Propp, 1968; Zelenin, 1991). Mami Wata, although more complex given her aspects of healing, wealth, and worship, still carries the message that water possesses a power that must be respected and not treated carelessly (Drewal, 2008).

The differences emerge mainly in form, gender, moral nuance, and social context. *Balum Beudé* tends to be gender-neutral and places greater emphasis on dangerous locations and the form of a floating red mat (Kompas.com, n.d.; Sentinel, n.d.).

By contrast, water-spirit motifs in other cultures are often strongly gendered. The Kappa possesses very specific physical traits (a water-filled depression on the head, a shell, and webbed feet) as well as ambivalent nature, capable of both harm and help once respected or defeated (Foster, 2015). The Kelpie is deceptive and predatory, emphasizing visual temptation in the form of a beautiful horse whose stickiness prevents the victim from escaping (Briggs, 1976). The Rusalka carries a strong emotional, sexual, and gender-related connotations, linked to the death of young women and the fertility of the land (Propp, 1968; Zelenin, 1991). Meanwhile, Mami Wata is depicted as a beautiful, alluring woman associated with fertility, wealth, modernity, and strict demands of loyalty (Drewal, 2008).

The differences among these water-spirit motifs become clearer when each is situated within its specific cultural context. The Kappa's ambivalence, for instance, is closely tied to Japanese cultural values that emphasize balance and the possibility of taming or negotiating with non-human beings through respect and proper conduct. The Kelpie emerges from the geographical realities of Scotland, a landscape dense with deep lochs and sudden, treacherous currents; its deceptive beauty as a horse therefore serves as a culturally resonant warning against the hidden dangers of seemingly calm waters. The Rusalka, in Slavic tradition, is intertwined with notions of untimely female death and the fertility of the land, reflecting broader cultural concerns with the boundary between the living and the dead as well as seasonal cycles of renewal. Meanwhile, Mami Wata developed within the historical contexts of trade, colonialism, and modernity in West Africa and its diaspora, which explains her dual association with wealth, healing, and the strict demands of loyalty. By contrast, *Balum Beudé* remains largely gender-neutral and is more strongly anchored in the regulation of everyday behavior in Acehnese aquatic spaces, particularly rivers and estuaries.

The uniqueness of *Balum Beudé* lies in several aspects. First, the form of a floating redmat is highly local and easily recognizable motif, differing from the more common anthropomorphic or zoomorphic forms found in other motifs (Kompas.com, n.d.; Sentinel, n.d.). Second, its relatively direct connection to children's education and the regulation of behavior in everyday aquatic spaces. Third, in its modern version, its association to environmental pollution issues adds an ecological layer relevant to contemporary challenges (Sentinel, n.d.). Fourth, the Acehnese context, in which local belief coexists with Islamic values, creates a distinctive space of negotiation, in which stories about water guardians can exist alongside religious teaching without necessarily excluding one another (Abdullah, 2006).

By situating *Balum Beudé* within this network of motifs, it becomes clear that Acehnese children's stories do not stand alone as an isolated phenomenon. They represent a local variation of a universal motif born from humanity's shared experience of confronting the power of water, which gives life while also bringing death (Damrosch, 2003; Ingold, 2021). At the same time, its local features such as, form, name, socio-historical context, and pedagogical function, lend a distinctive epistemological color that enriches the global body of knowledge on how humans understand and negotiate with nature.

The Contribution of Acehnese Local Literature to World Literature

The contribution of Acehnese children's stories featuring *Balum Beudé* to world literature lies in at least two main domains. First, it offers a model for transmitting ecological wisdom through a narrative that is simple, memorable, and dense with meaning. Children are not taught environmental theory abstractly or through lectures; they are taught through a figure that lives in the collective imagination and is tied to real places around them (Chawla, 2009; Sobel, 2025). This model is relevant to ecological education across cultures that still maintain a strong oral tradition, and it can also be adapted into new forms such as children's books, digital stories, or local-content curricula (Aghasaleh, 2019; Berkes, 2017).

The contribution of *Balum Beudé* folklore to ecological studies, comparative literature, and world literature becomes particularly evident when examined through the two contemporary children's books analyzed in this study. Findings from *Balumbili Sang Plisi I* by Zein & Jarjani and *Baluem Beude Hantu Laut* by Agustina demonstrate that the motif has not only survived but has also undergone meaningful adaptation. In *Balumbili Sang Plisi I*, the figure retains its traditional supernatural and pedagogical function as a river guardian that regulates children's behavior and instills respect for aquatic spaces. In *Baluem Beude Hantu Laut*, the same motif is recontextualized through scientific explanation, transforming the "sea ghost" into a natural phenomenon (whirlpool) while still preserving its cautionary role. This shift from a purely supernatural-pedagogical emphasis toward a synthesis of local wisdom, scientific literacy, and contemporary environmental awareness, illustrates the motif's flexibility and continued relevance.

Such adaptation strengthens the contribution of Acehnese children's literature in three interrelated domains. In ecological studies, it offers a culturally grounded model of relational ontology in which rivers and the sea are treated as agentive spaces that demand respect. In comparative literature, it expands the map of global water-spirit motifs by introducing a largely gender-neutral, location-focused, and pedagogically explicit variant that differs from the more anthropomorphic or gendered forms found in Japanese, Scottish, Slavic, and West African traditions. Finally, within the framework of world literature, the case of *Balum Beudé* affirms that local literatures from non-metropolitan regions can actively participate in transnational conversations about human–nature relations, rather than remaining mere objects of external study (Damrosch, 2003; Casanova, 2004). By circulating in official children's storybooks, the motif moves beyond oral tradition and enters formal educational and literary spheres, thereby revitalizing local ecological knowledge for a generation facing intensifying environmental challenges.

Second, by entering the comparative conversation, Acehnese local literature expands the map of universal water-spirit motifs and demonstrates that non-Western epistemologies possess rich conceptual resources for understanding the contemporary ecological crisis (Descola, 2013; Ingold, 2021; Whyte, 2017). Within the context of transnational literature, this position matters. World literature does not consist solely of canonical works from the metropolitan centers of Europe and North America; it is also shaped by voices from various regions carrying different ways of viewing humans and nature (Damrosch, 2003; Casanova, 2004). *Balum Beudé*, through children's stories, brings the voice of Aceh and more broadly the Nusantara into that conversation. It

reminds us that ecological awareness does not always arise from modern movements or academic theory, but can also stem from wisdom that has long transmitted through oral stories across generations (Berkes, 2017).

A further implication is the possible revitalization of the *Balum Beudé* story in new forms that preserve its ontological and ecological layers. Children's storybooks, short animations, educational games, or learning modules based on local folklore could serve as media for reviving this figure for a generation growing up amid climate crisis and environmental degradation. In this way, local literature is not merely preserved as a cultural artifact displayed in a museum or recorded in an encyclopedia, but revived as a living resource for a generation confronting increasingly complex environmental challenges. Within this framework, Acehnese local literature becomes an active participant in the dynamics of transnational literature, rather than merely an object studied from the outside (Damrosch, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Balum Beudé* in Acehnese children's stories represents a rich and layered ecological ontology. This figure functions as a marker of the boundary between safe and dangerous space, a reminder of nature's agency that cannot be fully mastered by humans, and a medium for transmitting caution and respect toward aquatic environment. Through a figure that appears frightening, Acehnese children inherit a worldview that situates humans within a network of relations with non-human entities, rather than as the sole ruler over nature.

Comparison with the Kappa (Japan), the Kelpie (Scotland), the Rusalka (Slavic tradition), and Mami Wata (Africa) situates *Balum Beudé* within a network of universal water-spirit motifs found across many cultures. The structural similarities such as the danger of water, the ambivalence of these creatures, and their pedagogical function, point to a shared human experience of confronting the forces of nature. At the same time, *Balum Beudé's* local distinctiveness particularly its form as a red mat, its connection to children's education, and its association with contemporary environmental issues that makes a distinctive contribution to a global understanding of the human-nature relationship.

Thus, Acehnese children's stories are not only a cultural heritage that must be preserved but also an active contributor to world literature. They offer an ecological epistemology rooted in the local wisdom of the Indonesian archipelago and enrich the transnational discourse on how humans can coexist with nature more respectfully and wisely. Practical implications include the development of teaching materials based on local folklore, the revitalization of these stories in contemporary media formats suitable for children, and academic recognition that local literature holds a legitimate and important place in the global conversation about ecological crises and hopes.

Further research could expand the corpus of Acehnese children's stories containing similar motifs across various regions, examine contemporary children's reception of the *Balum Beudé* figure through field methods, and explore the possibility of a deeper dialogue between this local wisdom and global ecological movements and current ecological ontology theory. Through these steps, Acehnese local literature can

continue to speak, not only to itself, but also to a world that increasingly needs sources of wisdom on how to live together with the earth.

REFERENCES

Abdullah, I. (2006). Konstruksi dan reproduksi kebudayaan.

Aghasaleh, R. (2019). *Children and mother nature: Storytelling for a glocalized environmental pedagogy*. BRILL.

Berkes, F. (2017). *Sacred ecology*. Routledge.

Bird-David, N. (1999). "Animism" revisited: Personhood, environment, and relational epistemology. *Current Anthropology*, *40*(S1), S67–S91.

Briggs, K. M. (1976). A dictionary of fairies: hobgoblins, brownies, bogies, and other supernatural creatures.

Burns, R. (2025). *The complete poems and songs of Robert Burns*. Waverley Books.

Casanova, P. (2004). *The world republic of letters*. Harvard University Press.

Chawla, L. (2009). Growing up green: Becoming an agent of care for the natural world. *The Journal of Developmental Processes*, *4*(1), 6–23.

Child, R. (n.d.). *Kappa*.

Creswell, J. W. (2016). *Research Design: Pendekatan Metode Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, dan Campuran* (Edisi 4). Pustaka Pelajar.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Damrosch, D. (2003). *What is world literature?* (Vol. 5). Princeton University Press Princeton.

Daud, B. (1999). *Kamus basa Acèh= kamus bahasa Aceh= Acehnese-Indonesian-English thesaurus*. Pacific Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The ….

De Castro, E. B. V. (2012). *Cosmological perspectivism in Amazonia and elsewhere* (Vol. 1). HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory Manchester.

Descola, P. (2013). *Beyond nature and culture*. University of Chicago Press.

Drewal, H. J. (2008). Mami Wata: Arts for water spirits in Africa and its diasporas. *African Arts*, *41*(2), 60–83.

Foster, M. D. (2015). *The Book of Yokai. Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*. California, University of California Press. DOI: https://doi. org/10.1525 ….

Harvey, G. (2005). *Animism: Respecting the living world*. Wakefield Press.

Hermansyah. (2015). *Manuskrip Aceh: Revitalisasi Kearifan Masyarakat Aceh Di Era Global*. *5*(1), 25–35.

Hidayatullah, P. (2024). *Baluembidi*.

Ingold, T. (2021). *Being alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Routledge.

Kompas.com. (n.d.). *Balum Bili, Hantu Sungai yang Takut Suara Senapan*.

Merdeka.com. (n.d.). *Balum Bili, Makhluk Tak Kasat Mata Penunggu Perairan Aceh*.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis*. sage.

Propp, V. (1968). Morphology of the folktale (L. Scott, Trans.). *Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.(Original Work Published 1928)*.

Safriadi, S. (2019). Sihir dan Hantu di Kalangan Masyarakat Aceh (Studi Terhadap Masyarakat Nisam Aceh Utara). *Al Mabhats: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Agama*, *4*(1), 75–96.

Sentinel, I. (n.d.). *Balum Bili: Mysterious Creature Dwell in the Rivers of Aceh*.

Snouck Hurgronje, C. (1906). The Achehnese. *Translated by AWS O'Sullivan. Leiden: EJ Brill*.

Sobel, D. (2025). *Childhood and nature: Design principles for educators*. Cornell University Press.

Strang, V. (2024). Listening to the river: Representing non-human needs and interests in debates about water governance and management. *River Research and Applications*, *40*(9), 1698–1709.

Sufi, R., Budi Wibowo, A., Dewi Wanti, I., Widarni, E., Djuniat, D., Seno, S., Setiawan, I., & Wahyuni, S. (1998). *Keanekaragaman suku dan budaya di Aceh*. Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan.

Whyte, K. (2017). Indigenous climate change studies: Indigenizing futures, decolonizing the Anthropocene. *English Language Notes*, *55*(1), 153–162.

Zelenin, N. (1991). *Ocherki russkoi mifologii*. Kniga.