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Narrative Structure of the Dayak Benuaq Folktale ‘*Pohon Berdaun Kain*’: A Proppian Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Folktales function not only as entertainment but also as cultural mechanisms for transmitting values and legitimizing social norms. However, structural studies of Kalimantan folklore, particularly those applying Vladimir Propp’s morphological approach, remain limited. This gap indicates the need for systematic analysis to reveal the narrative patterns underlying local folktales. This study aims to analyze the narrative structure of the Dayak Benuaq folktale *Pohon Berdaun Kain* using Vladimir Propp’s morphology. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with a textual analysis design. The data were obtained from the book *Cerita Rakyat Kabupaten Kutai Barat*, published by the East Kalimantan Language Center. The results show that only 9 out of Propp’s 31 narrative functions are realized, forming a double-move narrative pattern. The structure develops from the resolution of personal conflict to the establishment of collective moral legitimacy through the distribution of magical agents, transformation, and punishment. Several spheres of action experience reduction and shifts, including the absence of the false hero function and the symbolic transformation of the princess and father roles. These findings demonstrate that Propp’s morphology is adaptive and relevant for analyzing Indonesian folklore, particularly in revealing how narrative structures function as mechanisms for reproducing social values. This study contributes to the development of folklore studies and structuralism by providing empirical evidence from the Dayak Benuaq cultural context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Folktales are part of the intangible cultural heritage that serve not only as entertainment but also as a medium for transmitting values, legitimizing social norms, and shaping a community’s collective identity. Folktales fall under the category of folklore, which refers to traditional culture passed down from generation to generation through the collective memory of a community. Danandjaja [1] classifies folklore into three forms:

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oral, partially oral, and non-oral; in this context, folk tales are part of oral folklore. Dundes [2] in his book *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales*, states that folklore is a symbolic communication system that reflects the social structure and collective mindset of a society.

However, rapid social change, modernization, and globalization have had a significant impact on the survival of oral traditions. As a system of cultural transmission, oral traditions are highly dependent on social practices and intergenerational communication, making them vulnerable to shifts when the social structure of a society changes [3]. Technological advancements, urbanization, and the influx of global culture have contributed to the decline of oral tradition transmission, alongside a decrease in direct intergenerational interaction and the growing dominance of modern media in society [4], [5]. Several cases indicate that folklore is becoming marginalized and faces a threat to its survival due to waning interest among younger generations [6]. Furthermore, the digital age has accelerated this transformation by shifting oral performance practices toward technology-based media consumption, such as television, social media, and other digital platforms, which alter how society produces, conveys, and understands cultural narratives [7]. This situation indicates that oral traditions face serious challenges in maintaining their existence amidst the dynamics of the times.

Therefore, the preservation of folklore cannot be achieved through documentation alone but also requires scientific research capable of uncovering the narrative mechanisms that shape it. Without structural analysis, folklore risks being understood merely as a cultural product, rather than as a narrative system possessing internal patterns and logic. Modern folklore studies demonstrate that the structural approach is one analytical model capable of explaining the consistency of patterns underlying narrative variations. Narrative structure is not merely understood as a sequence of events, but as functional relationships among narrative elements that form a unity of meaning [8]. In line with this, from the perspective of anthropological structuralism, Lévi-Strauss [9] views myths and folktales as relational systems built upon recurring patterns and specific oppositions.

Furthermore, the most systematic structural approach in folklore analysis is the morphology of the folktale proposed by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp's morphological theory positions the functions of characters' actions as the primary elements shaping narrative structure. Propp identified thirty-one narrative functions arranged in a fixed sequence, although not all are always present in every story. This approach enables an objective analysis of folktale structure through the identification of characters' action functions and the distribution of spheres of action.

Various previous studies at the international and national levels indicate that Propp's theory remains relevant across diverse cultural contexts and genres. Peng [11] demonstrates the application of Propp's functions in modern works, while Lahlou [12] identifies morphological patterns in realist novels. Research by Masanat et al. [13] on Iban folklore also demonstrates the existence of local adaptations without losing the basic structural framework. Furthermore, Anatolyevna [14] highlights the persistence of functional patterns in contemporary works. However, not all of Propp's functions are fully realized. Naji [15] and Phindane [16] point to a reduction in these functions depending on

the cultural context, while Dogra [17] criticizes the limitations of Propp's taxonomic approach. In the Asian region, research by Wama and Nakatsu [18], as well as Nurjanah and Shofa [19], indicates that Propp's structure remains identifiable despite undergoing modifications. In Indonesia, similar studies have been conducted on various folktales such as Bapak Tua [17], Batu Menangis [20], Jaka Poleng [21], Si Kantan [22] and Babad Cirebon [23].

Nevertheless, these studies remain dominated by the regions of Java, Sumatra, and parts of Sulawesi. Conversely, morphological studies of Kalimantan folklore, particularly among the Dayak Benuaq community, remain very limited. Furthermore, previous research on the Pohon Berdaun Kain tale has focused more on moral values and social solidarity [24] rather than its narrative structure. Another study by Murtadlo and Rokhmansyah [25] also emphasized cultural values rather than morphological analysis. Therefore, there has been no study that specifically and systematically analyzes the narrative structure of Dayak Benuaq folktales using Vladimir Propp's morphological approach.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the narrative structure of the Dayak Benuaq folktale Pohon Berdaun Kain using Vladimir Propp's morphological approach through the identification of narrative functions and the mapping of the scope of action. This study is designed using a descriptive qualitative approach based on text analysis to uncover the narrative structural patterns that shape the story systematically. This study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of folklore and structuralism studies, particularly in expanding the application of Propp's theory within the cultural context of Central Indonesia. Additionally, this study is expected to offer practical benefits as an effort toward folklore preservation through an understanding of its narrative structure, as well as serve as a reference for further research in literary and cultural studies.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a textual analysis design. This approach was chosen because the study aims to describe and interpret the narrative structure of folk tales based on the system of action functions as formulated in Vladimir Propp's morphology. In qualitative research, the text is positioned as the object of analysis, understood through an in-depth interpretation of its meaning and the relationships between its elements [26]. A descriptive approach allows for a systematic exposition of narrative structure without altering the data, and is relevant for understanding cultural phenomena based on meaning and context [27].

Epistemologically, this study is grounded in the structuralist paradigm, which views a text as a self-contained system with internal rules that form a unity of meaning. The analysis focuses on the functional relationships between elements within the text, rather than on the external context. Propp's morphological approach is employed because it provides a systematic analytical framework for identifying the functions of characters' actions and their distribution within the plot, while also enabling the objective and measurable mapping of narrative structure.

The data source for this study is the folktale Pohon Berdaun Kain (The Tree with Cloth Leaves) found in the book *Cerita Rakyat Kabupaten Kutai Barat* (Folktales of West

Kutai Regency) on pages 46-48 [28]. The selection of a single text was done purposively to allow for a comprehensive in-depth analysis of the narrative structure. The unit of analysis in this study is the narrative segment, which is a part of the text representing a single event or character action that serves a structural function in the development of the plot. A narrative segment can be a clause or a series of clauses containing a single action function according to Propp's morphological categories. For example, a character's action that demonstrates an effort to find a solution to a deficiency is classified as the mediation function; thus, each segment is analyzed based on the action function it embodies within the story structure.

Data collection was conducted using a read-and-record technique through intensive reading of the text to identify narrative segments relevant to Propp's functions [29]. The reading process was carried out in stages, beginning with an initial reading to gain a general understanding of the plot, followed by an analytical reading to mark narrative segments containing structural functions.

Data analysis followed the interactive analysis model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [30], which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion. In this process, relevant narrative segments were selected and focused on for further analysis, then classified into Propp's thirty-one functions based on the alignment of the characters' actions as represented in the text. The classification results were organized to examine the sequence of functions and their distribution patterns within the story structure, including the potential formation of single-move or double-move tale patterns. The analysis continues with the identification of spheres of action to map the structural roles of characters, as well as structural interpretations to explain patterns of emergence, reduction, and adaptation of functions within the local cultural context.

The operational definition of each function refers to the original categories in *The Morphology of the Folktale*, with contextual adjustments to the meaning of actions in the text so as to maintain Propp's principle of structural sequence while remaining adaptive to the local cultural context. Tausyad and Zein [20] emphasize the importance of clear functional definitions in avoiding misclassification, while Masanat [13] notes that interpretive flexibility is necessary within the context of Southeast Asian oral traditions. Both studies reinforce the validity of the approach in this research.

This study employs consistent operational definitions to ensure coding reliability, accompanied by an iterative coding process and cross-segment consistency checks. The coding process was conducted independently by the researcher (intracoder reliability) by strictly referring to the theoretical framework, and was supported by limited comparison with previous research findings to minimize interpretive bias and enhance the consistency of the analysis [31]. Additionally, data validity was ensured through meticulous observation, consistent analytical procedures, and theoretical triangulation by comparing the results of this study with those of similar studies [32].

This study has limitations because it uses only one folktale text as a data source. Therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all Dayak folklore or Indonesian folklore more broadly, but rather serve as a representation of structural analysis within the specific context of the story under examination.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

Based on a textual analysis of the folktale *Pohon Berdaun Kain*, it was found that not all 31 narrative functions as formulated by Vladimir Propp were realized in the text. Of these functions, only nine were identified: villainy (A), lack (a), mediation (B), counteraction (C), donor (D), liquidation (K), magical agent (F), transfiguration (T), and punishment (U). Although the number of functions present is limited, their distribution forms a systematic structural configuration and indicates a double-move tale pattern, namely two interconnected narrative cycles. The distribution of these narrative functions can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. Distribution of Propp's Narrative Functions in the Folktale *Pohon Berdaun Kain* (The Tree with Cloth Leaves)

Function Number	Function Symbol	Function Name	Narrative Event in <i>Pohon Berdaun Kain</i>
8	A	Villainy	Burung raksasa menghancurkan sarang (hlm. 46)
8	a	Lack	Anak Punai mati dan tidak ada tempat mengubur (hlm. 46)
9	B	Mediation	Punai menyadari kebutuhan solusi (hlm.46)
10	C	Counter Action	Punai mencari bantuan (hlm. 46)
12	D	Donor	Nenek memberikan tanah (hlm.47)
19	K	Liquidation	Anak punai dikuburkan (hlm. 48)
14	F	Magical Agent	Pohon berdaun kain tumbuh (hlm. 48)
29	T	Transfiguration	Nenek menjadi kaya (hlm. 48)
30	U	Punishment	Ape bersaudara tetap miskin (hlm. 48)

Based on this table, the narrative structure of the story forms two main narrative cycles. The first cycle follows the sequence A-a-B-C-D-K, representing the resolution of personal conflict, while the second cycle forms the sequence F-T-U, indicating an expansion of the structure toward collective moral legitimacy. This pattern can be visualized through the following plot diagram.

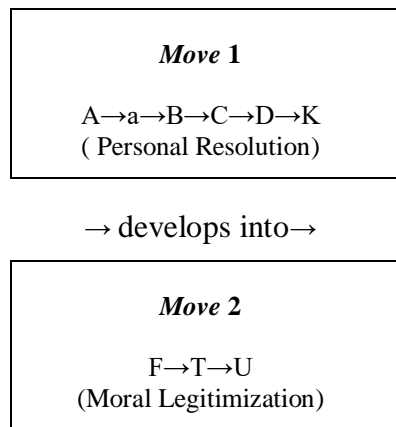


Figure 1. Movement Cycle Patterns in the Folklore of the Tree with Cloth Leaves

Through the plot diagram, structurally, the first cycle begins with the function of villainy, manifested through the actions of the giant bird that destroys Punai's nest and causes the death of his child. This event triggers a state of lack, both the loss of the child and the absence of a burial site. Awareness of this condition gives rise to the function of mediation, which then evolves into a counteraction through Punai's decision to seek help. This process reaches resolution when the donor function emerges through the character of the grandmother, who provides land unconditionally, thereby enabling the liquidation function: the burial of Punai's child as a resolution to the personal conflict.

The second cycle demonstrates a broader narrative structure through the emergence of the magical agent function, namely the tree with cloth leaves that grows from the grave of Punai's child. The presence of this magical agent triggers the function of transfiguration, the transformation of the grandmother's social status from poverty to prosperity, which is then followed by the function of punishment experienced by Ape and his siblings in the form of ongoing poverty. Thus, the story's structure not only resolves individual conflicts but also regulates the distribution of rewards and punishments within a collective moral framework.

Furthermore, an analysis of the spheres of action reveals that the distribution of character roles has undergone a reduction and shift compared to Propp's classical model. The giant bird serves as the catalyst for the initial conflict within the villain's sphere, while the Ape and his siblings function as secondary moral antagonists. Punai occupies the role of the seeker hero in the first cycle; however, in the second cycle, the heroic focus shifts to the grandmother character, who transforms. The donor function is executed without a testing phase, so the D-E-F pattern is not fully realized, while the dispatcher and false hero functions are not found. The princess and father spheres are present in symbolic form through representations of prosperity and social recognition. These findings indicate that the story structure remains consistent with the morphological framework despite adaptations in the distribution of functions and roles.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the narrative structure of the *Pohon Berdaun Kain* folktale generally aligns with the morphological framework proposed by Vladimir Propp; these findings also reveal significant adaptations within the local cultural context. The presence of the double-move tale pattern confirms that narrative structure functions not only as a sequence of events but as a relational system linking the resolution of personal conflict with the establishment of social value legitimacy. The narrative function in this study does not stop at the stage of liquidation of lack, but rather evolves into a mechanism for the distribution of value through the relationship between the magical agent, transfiguration, and punishment.

When compared to previous studies, these findings demonstrate both consistency and development. Research by Naji [15] and Phindane [16] reveals that not all of Propp's functions are fully realized in various folklore traditions but undergo selection according to cultural context. The findings in this study reinforce this argument by showing that only nine functions appear, yet they still form a complete and coherent structure. Furthermore,

Masanat's [13] research on Southeast Asian folklore indicates that the distribution of functions can undergo local adaptation without losing the basic morphological framework. More specifically, the results of this study illustrate such adaptations through the absence of certain functions, such as the dispatcher and false hero, as well as the absence of a testing pattern within the donor function (D-E-F), which is replaced by a direct gifting pattern based on altruistic values.

Furthermore, when compared to previous research highlighting altruistic values in the story of the Tree with Cloth Leaves [24], this study offers a more in-depth contribution by demonstrating that such values are not merely present at the thematic level but are structurally integrated into the configuration of narrative functions. The relationship between the magical agent, transfiguration, and punishment demonstrates that moral values are constructed through structural mechanisms, rather than merely inserted as a message. The narrative structure in this story functions as a system that actively reproduces social norms, particularly the opposition between generosity and stinginess.

On the other hand, findings regarding the transformation of antagonism indicate a shift from physical conflict toward moral conflict. In Propp's classical model, the antagonist typically appears as a persistent destructive force; however, in this story, physical antagonism serves only as the initial trigger for conflict. Subsequently, the structural opposition evolves into moral antagonism manifested through stinginess and the refusal to grant requests for help. This shift indicates that narrative structures within a local context not only preserve morphological patterns but also adapt them to represent the value systems alive within society.

However, the structuralist approach used in this study has limitations. Morphological analysis tends to focus on internal relations between functions, making it less capable of capturing the cultural, historical, and symbolic dimensions underlying the text. Criticism of this approach, as noted in various studies, suggests that taxonomic models such as the one developed by Propp have not yet been fully capable of accommodating the complexity of cultural meaning in folklore. In the context of the Pohon Berdaun Kain story, the structural approach can explain the distribution of functions, but it has not fully revealed the symbolic meaning of the Pohon Berdaun Kain within the belief system of the Dayak Benuaq community. Therefore, the structural analysis in this study should be understood as one approach that a cultural perspective in future research can complement.

This study specifically demonstrates that the narrative structure in the Pohon Berdaun Kain folktale functions not only as a plot-building device but also as an internal mechanism that systematically shapes and legitimizes the community's moral values. This study uniquely demonstrates that the Dayak Benuaq folktale Pohon Berdaun Kain adapts Propp's morphology into a localized double-move narrative pattern that systematically legitimizes communal moral values. These findings affirm that Propp's morphology is adaptive and contextual, and remains relevant for analyzing the dynamics of structure and meaning in Indonesian folklore.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the narrative structure in the folktale *Pohon Berdaun Kain* can not only be mapped using Vladimir Propp's morphological framework but also functions as a system that organizes the relationships between conflict, resolution, and the legitimization of values into a coherent whole. The identified double-move tale structure confirms that the narrative does not end with the resolution of personal conflict but evolves into a mechanism linking the characters' actions to broader social and moral consequences. Theoretically, this study makes a significant contribution to the study of Indonesian folklore by demonstrating that Propp's morphological approach remains relevant and adaptable in analyzing the structure of Nusantara folk tales. This study expands the application of Propp's theory into the context of Kalimantan folklore, specifically the Dayak Benuaq, which has received relatively little attention in structural studies. Furthermore, this study affirms that Propp's morphology is not a rigid framework, but rather a flexible and contextual analytical model capable of accommodating reductions, shifts, and transformations of functions in accordance with local cultural value systems.

The implications of this study are not only theoretical but also practical for the development of folklore studies. Academically, these findings reinforce the position of structural analysis as an effective approach for uncovering the internal mechanisms of meaning formation in folktales. More broadly, this study contributes to efforts to preserve folklore as intangible cultural heritage by demonstrating that folktales possess a structured narrative system rich in values, thereby warranting continued study, teaching, and transmission to future generations.

This study is not without limitations, as it focuses solely on a single folk tale text using a structural approach. Therefore, the results of this study are not intended to be generalized to all Dayak folklore or Indonesian folklore as a whole. Furthermore, the morphological approach used has not fully revealed the cultural, symbolic, and historical dimensions underlying the story, leaving room for the development of a more comprehensive analysis.

Given these limitations, future research is recommended to conduct a comparative study of folk tales from various Dayak sub-ethnic groups to examine the variations and consistency of narrative patterns within a broader cultural context. Furthermore, future research could integrate the structural approach with cultural or anthropological approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between narrative structure and the community's belief systems. Thus, folklore studies not only contribute to the advancement of knowledge but also hold relevance for society in understanding, preserving, and revitalizing local cultural identity.

The final findings of this study strongly emphasize that Vladimir Propp's morphological flexibility in a local context demonstrates that narrative structure is not a static system but rather a dynamic mechanism capable of adapting to the cultural values that underpin it. Therefore, the main contribution of this study lies in the assertion that Propp's morphological theory retains strong theoretical applicability in interpreting and explaining the dynamics of structure and meaning in Indonesian folklore.

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