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Decolonizing Comparative Literature

Reading Across Southeast Asian Literatures

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Chapter 7
Decolonizing Human, Animal, and Plant Relationships: Some Cases from Selected Southeast Asian Folktales

Simon Arsa Manggala

Abstract Our planet is facing environmental and climate challenges, many of which stem from the way humans exploit nature for their own benefit. As a result, the relationship between humans and nature requires closer attention. This chapter explores the representation of humans, animals, and plants in folktales, addressing the tension between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives. It highlights how Indigenous knowledge from certain regions in Southeast Asia offers contextual and relevant ways of life for addressing ecological issues. The selected folktales in this study come from Komodo Island, Lombok Island, Vietnam, and the Malaysian Peninsula. These folktales are analyzed textually using Greimas's actantial analysis, which is particularly suited for accommodating nonhuman actants. The narrative structure maps the desires of the subjects as they strive to achieve their goals. The findings reveal both anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives within the folktales. However, they also emphasize a vision of harmonious coexistence between humans, animals, and plants. Notably, the analysis underscores the spirit of co-dependency and value-sharing, challenging colonial individualism and the imposed separation between humans and nature. These themes are particularly relevant to addressing ecological issues, as they promote the idea of equal agency between humans and the natural world. By embracing Indigenous knowledge, people can become more mindful of their relationship with nature. This chapter calls for further research to highlight Indigenous knowledge in folktales as a means of resisting colonial domination in both thoughts and practices.

Keywords Anthropocentrism · Ecocentrism · Ecocriticism · Folktales · Indigenous knowledge

This chapter spotlights Indigenous knowledge as represented in selected folktales to enhance its visibility in academic discussions. Indigenous knowledge refers to the

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ways in which people and societies understand their surroundings through continuous interaction with the natural world (Ford et al.; Son et al.). Unlike modern scientific knowledge, Indigenous knowledge follows a distinct logic (Sraku-Lartey 44–45). Highlighting Indigenous knowledge is a crucial step in the academic decolonization process, as Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing face persistent threats from dominant colonial narratives. Their existence is vulnerable to erasure due to the hegemonic power and influence of colonialism. Alfred and Corntassel argue that colonial domination continues to evolve as a means of erasing Indigenous histories and connections to place (601). As a result, uncovering marginalized Indigenous knowledge amid the dominance of colonial narratives requires rigorous observation. Simpson further suggests that maintaining an Indigenous worldview is a strategic means of disentangling Indigenous peoples from the control of colonizing state governments (373). Therefore, every effort to cultivate sensitivity toward Indigenous knowledge and empower Indigenous communities remains vital.

This chapter examines the complex relationship between humans and non-humans in folktales from four places in Southeast Asia: the Lombok and Komodo Islands in Indonesia, the Malaysian Peninsula, and Vietnam. By exposing these relationships, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding that may inform and motivate those engaged in environmental protection and conservation, as Culas hypothesizes in response to the failures of natural area conservation efforts in Vietnam (36). Through a Southeast Asian lens, this chapter seeks to promote Indigenous knowledge from the regions, fostering a process of unlearning colonial knowledge and influence. It aligns with Fadzil's work in showcasing the values of "sharing" and "co-dependency" between humans and nature (125).

The discussion in this chapter centers on how humans and non-humans are conceptualized, portrayed, and engaged with in folktales. Given the broad scope of non-human entities, this study focuses specifically on plants and animals to provide a more precise and structured analysis. Plants and animals frequently appear in folktales and have been the subject of academic discourse. Additionally, this chapter responds to the ongoing tension between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives, contributing to more decolonized readings of folktales.

Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, and Folktales

In anthropocentrism, humans are placed at the center of existence. Their appearance, depiction, actions, and characteristics take the spotlight, while non-humans remain in the shadows. Eckersley defines anthropocentrism as "the belief that there is a clear and morally relevant dividing line between humankind and the rest of nature, that humankind is the only or principal source of value and meaning in the world, and that non-human nature is there for no other purpose but to serve humankind" (51). This perspective treats humans as detached and separate from the rest of the universe, while non-humans are relegated to a secondary, complementary, or auxiliary role. Bellarsi takes this further, arguing that anthropocentrism subordinates, exploits, and even

erases non-human others (74). From this standpoint, non-humans are regarded merely as resources (Cooke 279). Even policies and sustainable development efforts that appear to benefit nature are often driven by an anthropocentric mindset (Horsthemke 27). For example, in some Nepali proverbs, anthropocentric attitudes reduce non-humans to mere resources for human use (Lamichhane 124). Similarly, Shrivastava (126) reports that non-humans are frequently depicted as tools or economic assets for humans.

The centrality of humans in anthropocentrism has been challenged by perspectives that emphasize interconnectedness between humans and other entities, such as plants, animals, places, objects, and supernatural beings. Kidner argues that human-centeredness in anthropocentrism is political and contributes to the destruction of both human and non-human well-being (474). In other words, anthropocentrism does not only harm non-humans but also negatively impacts human societies. Nabulya's study, which examined five Ugandan folktales, challenges the assumed dichotomy between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. It contends that human-centeredness should not be equated with human chauvinism but should instead be understood as a form of communal awareness aimed at monitoring and maintaining nature (322). In a similar vein, Budhathoki's ecocritical study explores how the relationship between humans and non-humans affects both parties (56–57). Likewise, Onodera and Fujii investigate ancestral perceptions of nature and their relevance to education, specifically examining how folktales can be used to teach students about the coexistence of humans and rivers (4).

From the previously reviewed research and academic discourse on anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, there are four forms of relationships that humans and non-humans can have. First, there is a relationship, as defined by Eckersley, Shrivastava, Bellarsi, and Horsthemke in which humans are dominant over non-humans. This type of relationship benefits humans and is nuanced by the destruction of the non-humans. Second, as proposed by Kidner, there are situations where humans are central, and the centeredness negatively affects both humans and non-humans. The third form of relationship is, as explained by Nabulya, that human-centeredness is also for the betterment of the environment. The fourth form locates the mutual connectedness of humans and non-humans, as observed by Budhathoki and Onodera and Fujii. This chapter does not propose a new approach accommodating the views on anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Instead, this chapter is more descriptive research than prescriptive one in spotlighting the relationships humans and non-humans possess in the folktales from Southeast Asian regions.

Southeast Asian communities hold a particular view on the human-nature relationship. The view can respond to the tension between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism nowadays. In Southeast Asia religions, humans and nature are connected and related (Savage 264). On one hand, humans' actions and practices influence how they perceive and treat their natural environment. On the other hand, the natural environment also affects people's behavior and conduct. Savage further mentions that the Indigenous communities hold the concepts of "equity, respect, reciprocity, and reverence" in their relation to nature (265). Whyte also mentions that Indigenous people are concerned with reciprocity in the way they bond with others including with nature

(Indigenous Environmental Justice: Anti-colonial Action through Kinship 267). The equal and mutual relationship recognizes both human and nature agencies and interspecies awareness. For instance, Ryan mentions the case of the jungle cat *Felis Chaus* in Thailand. The cat is speculated to be extinct, but it appears in a trap camera. The case shows the animal's resilience to live and the photographers' interspecies awareness (3). Indigenous people in Southeast Asia are also aware of their natural surroundings and define the meanings of their lives from them. (Bouphapanya and Hongsuwan 834). For instance, the people in the Isan ethnic community in Thailand view the Don Pu Ta Forest as a place for supernatural spirits and powers. The people do not see the forest merely as a source of food and shelter. This belief results in the preservation of the forest (839). Equal roles and agency of humans and nature are also depicted in short stories written by Indigenous youth for *Ang Babayas.* Lumad or the Indigenous people from the southern Philippines believe that trees, ferns, and forests have equal social status to humans (Sy 185). Further, the way Indigenous people and nature interact can be seen in folktales and stories circulated among the people.

Folktales represent the cultural values and preferences of the people (Porselvi 2). They are resourceful in learning the people's traditional and Indigenous knowledge about plants and animals. For instance, folktales in Pagu could preserve the language and traditional views, which will later be handed down to future generations (Dewi and Perangin-Angin). The researchers examined five folktales telling the stories of eight animals, namely fish, rat, chicken, crocodile, stork, dog, turtle, and monkey (76). In real-life practices, animals and plants are often depicted as ambivalent. In some cases, they are positively referred to as sacred entities, and in others, they are depicted negatively. For instance, the A'atsika considered themselves connected to the whales and paid some respect to them since they are considered their ancestral peoples (Huang 127). Numic people also treated wolves with respect and enacted them to their creator figure (Pierotti 7).

Plants and animals in literary works and folktales have also been studied by researchers. Tsuji examined 20 folktales from the Philippines which include monkey characters, and the monkeys were mostly depicted in negative ways and benefited humans due to colonial experience (41). Bhatia et al. studied people's perspectives toward ibex, wolf, snow leopard, and snow lion in trans-Himalayan folklore. They analyzed oral and written narratives by the people. The results showed that the wolves were depicted negatively for their behaviors preying on people's livestock, but they were also related positively to deities. Snow leopards and snow lions were also negatively seen for the same reasons as wolves. Though, snow lion was associated more positively than snow leopard. The researchers suggested that the findings could be considered for value-based approach conservation (8). Wessing examined tales about the origin of the rice Goddess and the roles of forests in tales from West Java and Central Java. Similar to Dewi, Tsuji, Wessing, and Bhatia et al., this chapter intends to explore the existence of plants and animals in narratives, particularly in folktales. The exploration also aims to describe the relationship between humans and non-humans as depicted in the tales.

However, human-nature interconnectedness and its practical implications should always be put under the spotlight. In some Southeast Asian regions, folktales, plants, and animals are commodified to promote tourism. Their mentioning regards them as commodities merely to benefit humans or the community in a capitalistic direction. The commodification also threatens people's Indigenous knowledge. For instance, Pratiwi et al. encouraged the use of folklore to promote tourism in West Sumatra, Indonesia. They argued that promoting tourist destinations would increase community income (63). Similarly, Parani and Juliana proposed the use of storytelling to promote Toba Lake. What Pratiwi et al. and Parani and Juliana conducted did not aim at the development of the tales and the environment, but they utilized the tales for the economic benefit of some people in some areas (1215). Wiyatmi et al. examined how anthropocentrism affected deforestation and natural degradation as portrayed in Indonesian and Malaysian novels. The deforestation was motivated by the notion that natural resources are exploitable for political and personal interests (35).

Natural commodification can harm plants and animals, although in the case of tourism, plants and animals experience rather different exposure leading to similar danger. On one hand, plants in tourism are sometimes taken for granted. They are invisible and put in the background. Cohen and Fennell mentioned the plant's inferiority, stating that "animals are popular tourist attractions; plants are not" (2). The invisibility might put plants in danger, and plants might be treated improperly. On the other hand, although animals get more exposure, they also face dangers caused by human activities. There is an unequal power relation between humans and animals, especially in the case of domesticated animals (Young and Carr 1). Malamud expanded the dangers faced by animals from physical dangers like eating and skinning to cultural dangers by framing, representing, and reproducing animals in a particular way (1). In other cases, instead of promoting the plants and animals, the employment of plants and animals in promotional media could also be seen as commodification of the plants and animals. They are mentioned to attract tourists' interest in visiting places where plants and animals exist. Jęczmyk et al. researched the significance of animals in agritourism, and the result was that "keeping animals in agritourism farms is an attraction for tourists visiting them" (11).

Folktales have become sources to refer to and to use when it comes to ideology-spreading activism and purposes, including the building of identities (Novianti). Ideologically, this chapter's sources of data are selected stories mainly from Southeast Asian regions to provide spaces for non-Western stories, readers, and researchers to culturally contextualize their interpretations like some previous research. Eslit compared the dragons from Javanese, Thai, and Filipino mythologies to find their common motifs and themes (89). The research created an academic space for non-western contexts in characterizing dragons. The ideological analysis of folktales can also address the environmental issues due to their familiarity with the people. Yu et al. observed Kagan folktales from Mindanao, the Philippines to bring them into academic discourse and preserve their existence. The result of the analysis indicated that the people were familiar with animals in their culture (58). Dewi examined some stories from Asia depicting people and the environment. Although most of the examined stories were anthropocentric and people-centered, she found that eco-education

empowered children to be aware and to think about their environment (People and Nature in Asian Stories: Reading and Writing Materials for Eco Education 38).

Folktale Critical Reading as a Decolonialization Attempt

This chapter seeks to liberate interpretation from the captivity of the colonial mindset by centering Indigenous knowledge as depicted in selected folktales. By foregrounding the human-nature relationship within local stories and folktales, this study challenges Western anthropocentric retellings and interpretations. Masturah Alatas introduces the concept of "captive minds," referring to Western-dominated ways of thinking that prioritize intellectual trends developed abroad (M. Alatas 25–27). Sheik further argues that the West erases Indigenous knowledge by monopolizing knowledge production and perpetuating the myth that only Western knowledge is valid (91). Spotlighting Indigenous knowledge serves as a means to dismantle this myth.

When analyzing written folktales, researchers must recognize that these tales have undergone multiple transformations and translations. At a minimum, folktales have been altered from their original oral form into written texts, and many have also been translated into other languages, including those of colonizers. Ignoring the original context and narrators of these tales reflects a colonialist perspective (Haase 23). The dissemination of folktales in dominant Western languages, such as English, not only reflects the enduring influence of Western hegemony but also risks perpetuating it. Examining the case of British colonial translations of Indian folklore, Naithani argues that English-translated folktales were primarily intended for English-speaking audiences (19). Furthermore, the availability of these written folktales in English demonstrates how they were produced and circulated with Western readers in mind (Briggs and Naithani 247). To decolonize the reading of folktales that have been written and circulated in English, this chapter seeks to uncover traces of Indigenous voices within the texts. Zipes asserts that the purpose of studying folktales is to amplify oral narratives and the voices of the people. Therefore, careful analysis is necessary to highlight the Indigenous perspectives embedded in these tales.

Examining folktales also presents the decolonial spirit by promoting Indigenous values portrayed in the tales, especially in addressing human-nature relationships. The values and practices of Indigenous people might have been conducted, survived, and been successful long before their lands were colonialized by the imperialists. After the colonization, many oral Indigenous stories are reproduced under the influence of the imperialist colonizers. Critical rereading of texts can serve as a methodology for underscoring Indigenous people and their roles in text production (L. T. Smith 150). For instance, highlighting Indigenous medicines in stories can counter and challenge Western "scientific" medicine as the only remedy for illnesses. A similar tone is expressed by Savage "Unlike Western medicine, Southeast Asian folk medicines were holistic systems of body care, cures against illnesses, longevity preservation, and beauty treatments" (261). Further, many Indigenous practices are regarded as relevant to address present ecological problems.

As previously mentioned, ecological problems occur due to the separation of humans and nature, resulting in the exploitation of natural resources for human benefit. Concerning decolonization, the destruction of nature is amplified by colonialism's effects. Whyte mentions that "anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change is an intensification of environmental change imposed on Indigenous peoples by colonialism" and Indigenous people have their collective knowledge in adapting to the environmental changes (Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene 153–154). The specific ways Indigenous people address issues, including environmental ones, were in line with Syed Hussein Alatas's idea of the School of Autonomous Knowledge as Syed Imas Alatas defines the School of Autonomous Knowledge as "a school of thought where theory building, concept formation, the application of methods, and the recognition of definite phenomena are undertaken in a way that is relevant to a specific society and in contradiction to Eurocentric, androcentric, nationalist, or sectarian interests" (S. I. Alatas 9). Therefore, studying folktales can suggest Indigenous ways of addressing ecological issues. One of the Indigenous ways is the view on human-nature interconnectedness and interdependence. By viewing nature as inseparable from human existence, humans are expected to be more thoughtful in treating nature.

The Selected Folktales and the Framework

The research objects in this chapter are folktales published in four books titled Indonesian Folk Tales (Thio), Putri Naga Komodo & other Folktales (Langenheim), Singapore Children's Favourite Stories (Taylor), and Vietnamese Children's Favorite Stories (Phuoc). They were written in English. Besides the language, the books are selected due to their stories' shared themes and patterns. However, not all the folktales were taken as the research objects. This chapter only took a folktale from each book containing plants, animals, and humans in them. To observe the interconnectedness of humans and animals, the tales titled *The Dragon Princess of Komodo* (Langenheim) from Komodo Island and *Lo Aget and Lo Latjut* (Thio) from Lombok Island, Indonesia are selected. Plants and human relatedness are observable in *Mr. Cuoi under the Banyan Tree* (Phuoc) from Vietnam, and *Queen of the Forest* (Taylor) from Singapore.

The data are taken in the form of the word choices, their meanings, and the folktales' narrative structures. As the objects of the observation, the folktales mention and use familiar things and concepts, including those related to human, plants, and animals, in their delivery. Familiar things and concepts would most likely be acceptable and trusted by folktales' target readers. Mostly, folktales target readers are children (White 2; Thompson) and the purpose of folktales is mainly didactic to deliver teachings, morals, and ideal conduct agreed upon by society to the children (Kim et al.; Lewin; Sone). In the tales, familiarity is observable in any uses of language including the mentioning of local cultural terms and names, the choice of modifying adjectives, and sentence patterns, and the use of pronouns. For example,

the use of pronouns is powerful in providing spaces and voicing animals' voices and identities (Merskin 392). However, the same tools might portray plants and animals differently. Plants and animals can be depicted as distant and detached from human characters. In some cases, they are strange and peculiar. Those depictions potentially promote imbalance representation weighing more humans over plants and animals.

In exposing the complex relationship among humans, plants, and animals in folktales, this chapter organizes and frames the discussion by the actantial categories proposed by Greimas (Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method). The analysis examines the relationship among the actants. The concepts of actants cover wider categorization than characters in plots and stories. Actants can refer to any objects, not only humans (Rimmon-Kennan 36). The possibility to include non-humans as actants also supports the ecocriticism beliefs to create more space for non-humans. Actantial analysis is also feasible to examine the centrality of humans, plants, and animals in tales because they can take any actantial roles in the narratives. There are six actants, namely the subject, the object, the sender, the receiver, the helper, and the opponent (Hébert 80).

There is no fixed formula to assign plants and animals in folktales. Various assignments of plants and animals indicate their fluid and flexible expected roles in society. They might indicate the plants and animals' agency in folktales. However, those assignments can also be suspected as the results of human agency in the tale reproduction. If so, plants and animals are used for human interests. By using Greimas' actantial analysis, this chapter showcases how plants and animals are structurally positioned in folktales. They can serve as any actants in the narrative, i.e., the subject, object, helper, opponent, sender, and receiver. The subject is connected to the object by the axis of desire. In the narrative structure, the subject's main task is to fulfill the desire to achieve the object. The subject is connected to the helper and opponent by the power axis. The helper supports the subject in pursuing the object, whereas the opponent obstructs or hinders the subject from getting the object. The axis of knowledge or transmission indicates the initiators of the quest and the receiver of the object. For instance, in fables, plant and animal characters serve as subjects with the desire to achieve objects. In tales involving animals, such as dragons, animals are sometimes characterized as opponents. In stories about journeys, plants and animals can appear as the helpers or the senders.

The explanation and interpretation in this chapter are mainly conducted through ecolinguistic lenses. This chapter agrees and follows the notion proposed by Stibbe that "how humans treat each other and the natural world is influenced by our thoughts, concepts, ideas, ideologies and worldviews, and these, in turn, are shaped through language" (Ecolinguistics 2). Thus, from the use of language, the way humans and non-humans interact can be traced and evaluated. Ecolinguistics interrogates the use of language and discourse that lead to ecological destruction and social injustice (Stibbe, An Ecolinguistic Approach to Critical Discourse Studies 117). While explaining the natural ecology of language, Steffensen and Fill mentioned that ecolinguistics investigates the relations between language use and nature (9).

Related Indigenous Knowledge from the Regions

The Indigenous knowledge in this research is collected from previous relevant research on communities and societies in Lombok Island, Komodo Island, Vietnam, and the Malaysian peninsula. Of course, the presented Indigenous knowledge in this chapter is not the sole knowledge from those regions. The Indigenous knowledge chosen in this subchapter are the ones related to the relationship among humans, animals, and plants as depicted in the selected folktales.

In Lombok Island, the people believe in supernatural beings and powers. Koopman mentions that some people in North Lombok believe they had already known about a series of earthquakes before happening (1). They believe that they have been visited by supernatural beings like Dewi Anjani, the spirit from Mount Rinjani, or their ancestors in their dreams to warn them about the disaster. For Sasak people in Lombok, females are believed to be supernaturally more powerful than males, and their power emerges at night (Smith 259). However, the powerful females possessing supernatural powers are referred to as witches or *selaq* in the local language. *Selaq*s possess "the capacity to change their form at will, fly, traverse space at great speed, and penetrate physical barriers, including other persons' bodies" (Telle 95). *Selaq*s are beautiful and able to shape-shift into animals like monkeys, dogs, and cats (Smith 263–264).

The most circulated Indigenous knowledge from Komodo islands indicates that humans and Komodo are believed as *sebai* or twin (Setiawati et al.; Sunkar et al.; Ford et al.; Sudibyo). The kinship between humans and Komodo impacted the way people perceive and treat their environment and surroundings. In practice, the residents of the islands and the dragon respect each other. People from Komodo Village believe that *Ora,* the way they call Komodo, would not attack or disturb them without reason. People in the island leave some meat for Komodo dragons from their fishing or hunting (Sunkar et al. 5).

In Vietnam, the related Indigenous knowledge is about farming (Nguyen et al. 612) and for medical purposes (Rato 174). Some research examines how people plant native crops, forecast weather, and use local cultivation processes (Son, Kingsbury, and Hoa 5). The use of plants for medical purposes is common (Chuong et al.). For instance, Rato tells an event of a boy named Tì bitten by a snake and the people from the village rescued him using herbal medicine (174). Son et al. mention the use of ginger to treat dysentery, pharynx, and muscular pain (517–518). People in Vietnam demand medicinal plants as indicated by the availability of the plants in markets. After surveying markets in Sapa and Hanoi, Delang found out that in total there are 44 plants identified botanically in Sapa and Hanoi (384). The demand and the availability of medicinal plants suggest sustained practices based on Indigenous knowledge.

The story of *The Queen of the Forest* (Taylor) is taken from Singapore Children's Favorite Stories. However, in the end, the story indicates that the flower is found in the jungle of Malaysia. There are some names referring to the Indigenous people from Malayan peninsula. Among others are *Seng-Oi* (Fadzil 128), *Semai* (Robarchek 177)

(Shaari et al. 11953). Malaysian Indigenous people also believe in the relationship between supernatural beings/powers and nature. Fadzil mentions the Indigenous people of the Malay peninsular, the *Seng-Oi,* and how they describe *pangkal ti',* the supernatural guardian of an area (128–132). Inside a *pangkal ti'*, there might be another supernatural being called *keramat* and it can be from local supernatural beings or humans (132). Another supernatural being is called *gunig* (133) or a spirit. Robarchek elaborates that *gunig* is a spirit that might come to somebody's dream (180). Shaari et al. mention that spirits inhabit forests, communicate via dreams, and become inseparable parts of the environment (11964).

The Anthropocentric Readings of the Folktales: The Separation of Humans, Animals, and Plants

The anthropocentric readings indicate some consequences of anthropocentric perspectives in human and non-human relationships. First, the folktales show the imbalance relationship as suggested by Eckersley, Shrivastava, Bellarsi, and Horsthemke. Humans are dominant over the non-humans. The folktales are built and developed following the human subjects pursuing their desires. Non-humans' desires do not matter. Animals and plants serve as objects. For instance, the cat, the animal, in the story of Lo Aget and Lo Latjut is domesticated and becomes a human's belonging. Orah in the Dragon Princess of Komodo is characterized in comparison to Si Gerong. The trees in the story of Mr. Choui are exploited and commodified by humans. Second, there is a clear dividing line between human space and non-human spaces, i.e., plant and animal spaces, as proposed by Eckersley (51). In the tale of the Dragon Princes of Komodo, Orah might not live along with people in the neighborhood. Only after a supernatural being reminds Si Gerong that Orah is a family member, do the people accept Orah and take care of her. In Queen of the Forest and Mr. Cuoi under the Banyan Tree, humans and plants do not share a common living space. Human spaces are bright, safe, and known while plants are wild, intangible, and dangerous. Third, animals and plants are opponents to humans. This relationship results in the erasure of plants and animals as Bellarsi suggested anthropocentrism abuses and conducts the erasure of non-humans (74). For example, the cat's pelt is destroyed by Lo Aget, and the magical banyan tree is uprooted by Mr. Chuoi. Fourth, the plants are exploited and commodified as economic resources. The exploitation might seem for the betterment of both humans and the plant as Mr. Chuoi watered the magical banyan tree using clean water from the wishing well. Exploitation is driven by human's purpose and desire. The tree is exploited for its leaves and its economic benefits. In this section, I mention some excerpts and discuss how anthropocentric perspectives are told and presented in the folktales.

Animals are seen as the others in The Dragon Princess of Komodo (Langenheim) from Komodo Island and Lo Aget and Lo Latjut (Thio) from Lombok Island, Indonesia. The Dragon Princess of Komodo tells the story of two human and animal

siblings from Komodo islands. The male human is named Si Gerong and the animal is a female dragon lizard named Orah. The animal character is depicted as strange since her birth "Strange indeed, for Lea had given birth to a human son and twin sister who was *far* from human" (Langenheim 40). The deictic adjective "*far*" indicates human centrality, and the distance is relative to humans. As the story develops, the animal daughter is depicted by her uncommon interests and behaviors. The commonality of interests and behaviors is also in comparison to humans' interests and behaviors. Orah was said to attack the neighbors' goats and chickens. Society becomes suspicious of Orah. She also had a habit to leave the house and come back after several days. Eventually, Orah left the house for years and Si Gerong forgot about her. Meanwhile, Si Gerong, the human character is depicted as a skillful person. He could grow plants, make medicine, and hunt animals as an expert hunter. Orah is depicted by "…rearing onto its hind legs, mouth open and a single eye, black as ebony, fixed on the deer, …" (Langenheim 44). The human and animal characterization shows an imbalance relation since the animal is depicted as a physically monstrous being while the human is by the skills and abilities. At the end of the story, humans accepted and treated the dragons with kindness after a supernatural being reminded them that the dragon was their family. The depiction of human and animal characters shows the separation of humans and animals in that naturally they do not share a common place to live. To accept animals and live with them, humans need to be reminded by a supernatural being.

Structurally, the story of the Dragon Princess of Komodo is not built on a clear coherent major desire. Instead, there are two narrative structures in the tale. The main purpose of the story does not seem to follow a major desire of the actants but shifts from one desire to another. However, human actants are depicted to have clearer desires than animal actants. The two narrative structures focus on human subjects and diminish the roles of animals. In the first narrative structure, by assigning Empu Najo as the subject, the object would be the safety of the people. This desire is opposed by the Bajo people as the opponent and the people as the helper. The receivers of the object are Empu Najo's family and the people of Najo village. The narrative temporarily resolves after the people migrate to the mountain and proceed to another narrative structure centering on Si Gerong who hunted a deer. In the second narrative structure, the subject now is Si Gerong and the object is a deer. This actant configuration clearly shows the animal as the object of human desire. The hunting activity is obstructed by Orah, Si Gerong's long-lost lizard sister. The narrative ends with the subject's failure to obtain the object due to the opponent's obstruction.

Another story, Lo Aget and Lo Latjut (Thio) are from Lombok Island, Indonesia. Lo Aget and Lo Latjut are the human main characters even though their names mean lucky dog and unlucky dog). Lo Aget is told to be always lucky, while Lo Latjut is unlucky. The imbalance in human-animal relations is represented by the relationship between Lo Aget and his cat. Linguistically, the cat is human possession by referring to it as a *pet* and by the possessive adjective pronoun *his* in the noun phrase *his cat* as in "Lo Aget loved *his domestic pet* tenderly" (Thio 8). The cat is mentioned as a beautiful girl who magically transformed into a cat. She forgot to learn the spell to change back to the human form. Only a true love could break the spell forever. The

animal form is considered as limiting and a misfortune for the girl since she cannot act as humans do. Thus, when she asks for supernatural help, she manages to secretly transform into a beautiful lady and serve Lo Aget by cooking him delicious food. Lo Aget's cat is compared to Lo Latjut's *common* animal. Having a common animal is considered Lo Latjut's unluckiness. Different depictions of the cats show that animals are evaluated as lesser than humans. Only supernatural power can elevate animals' status.

The story of Lo Aget and Lo Latjut is also built on anthropocentric structures. Some events could be drawn into three actantial structure configurations. First, the relationship between Lo Aget and the cat can be mapped by the desire axis by which Lo Aget is the subject and giving good care to the cat is the object. There is no clear explicit sender in the narrative structure. However, the most feasible sender is Lo Aget's kindness. Lo Aget's desire to maintain good care for the cat was obstructed by the cat's transformation to be a beautiful girl. Since the cat is changing forms, Lo Aget cannot show his affection to the cat. Thus, there is also no receiver in the structure. In the narrative structure, the cat as the animal is objectified.

Second, the cat could be assigned as the subject since it seems to have a desire to pay back Lo Aget's kindness. However, it turned out that the desire did not come from the animal cat. It came from the girl taking the form of a cat. It shows that only humans can have a desire. The beautiful girl was helped by the "Father and Mother cat," the supernatural beings. They are the actants who transform the cat into the original form, the beautiful girl. Without their help, the cat could not transform into a beautiful girl because she forgot to learn the spell to transform back into the human form. The object of this second narrative structure is Lo Aget's happiness. The sender is the cat/girl's compassion. The opponent is the girl's secret that she is the cat. The subject was successful in obtaining the object. Lo Aget becomes the receiver. He was happy finding the delicious foods at home prepared by the girl.

Third, at the end of the story, Lo Aget becomes the subject having a desire to marry the beautiful girl. The object is marrying the girl. The opponents are the animal form and the magical spell preventing the cat from transforming into a beautiful girl. The helpers are Lo Aget's initiative to destroy the cat's pelt and Lo Aget's love for the girl. Lo Aget and the beautiful girl become the receiver in the actantial structure since they married. In this structure, the anthropocentric perspective is represented by assigning the animal as the opponent to the human actant's desire. The opponent obstructs and prevents the human subject from getting the object. The human subject solves the obstruction by erasing the animal representation in the narrative, the cat's pelt.

The human-plant relation in *Queen of the Forest* (Taylor) can also show anthropocentric interests. The story is about a single princess, Ria, loved by the King who wants to keep her happy and contented. The King provided all that the Princess needed. The King intended to find a husband for Ria. However, Ria did not have any interest in marrying anyone. She sneaked out to the garden. There she met the Prince of Dream named Putra Impian, who turns out a garden spirit. Ria fell asleep in the garden and transformed into a big flower, Rafflesia. Linguistically, Ria is characterized positively by nouns and adjectives: "Ria's hair was *gleaming* black, and flowed

right down her back. She usually wore a red ribbon in it. Her face was *open* and *friendly*, and her *dark eyes* sparkled with *fun*" (Taylor 34). Those characterizations indicate anthropocentric views as compared to the negative adjectives modifying the garden in "She had no idea that *dangers* might lurk out there in the *dark* garden" (Taylor 36). Ria's movement from the palace into the garden might represent the movement from a safe human environment to an unknown dangerous non-human environment although Ria felt peaceful to be among the plants and flowers. However, it turned out that the peaceful feeling was only the forest spirits' trick to capture wanderers. The plants as represented by the spirits of the forest are depicted as tricky. It strengthens the anthropocentric nuance.

The actantial structures can be seen from two subjects' perspectives, the king's and Ria's perspectives. First, the story begins with the king as the subject having a desire to make Ria happy. The object is Ria's happiness. The king's efforts and attempts to fulfill the desire are driven by the senders, his wife's death, and the fact that Ria was his sole child. The king thought that Ria would be happy if he could find her a husband who would take care of her. The king's wealth and richness play the role of helper in the narrative structure. Being rich and privileged the king held a party and invited many people to find a husband for Ria. Since Ria did not want to get married, Ria's unwillingness became the opponent, preventing the king from fulfilling his desire. Ria's missing has failed the king's attempt to get the object. The spirits of the forest also contribute to hindering the king from pursuing the object. There is no receiver in the first narrative structure. The second narrative structure is developed following Ria's desire. The desire is to find peace and comfort. So, the object in the second narrative structure is Ria's contentment. Ria pursued the goal by escaping from the party and sneaking into the garden. Ria's responsible thought that she needed to ask her father's permission serves as the opponent in the actantial analysis. This opponent is not so strong that Ria continues to explore and goes deeper into the garden. "Even though Ria thought she should ask her father's permission, she was intrigued" (Taylor 38). In the second narrative structure, the spirits of the forests acted as the helpers. Ria also takes the role of receiver in the narrative structure since she finds a peaceful life and is contented with her new life as a flower.

In the story of *Mr. Cuoi under the Banyan Tree* (Phuoc), plants are depicted as human medicine and human characters take benefits from plants. The story is about a woodcutter named Mr. Chuoi who found a magical banyan tree near the woods. The tree leaves could heal illness. Mr. Chuoi uprooted the tree and moved the tree to his garden. By using the magical tree leaves, Mr. Choui healed a merchant's daughter who became his wife. Mr. Chuoi and his wife took care of the tree by watering the tree with clean water from the wishing well. However, the wife unintentionally spilled a bucket of dirty water to the tree. The tree then magically uprooted and flew to the sky. Mr. Chuoi held the tree roots and was carried to the moon with the tree.

The linguistic choices might show the separation of human and plant spaces. The story normalizes the exploitation and commodification of plants for human benefit. Humans crossed to the plant's space to exploit the resources. The main character is a woodcutter living by cutting and selling wood, wooden baskets, herbs, and flowers. Human space is portrayed as pure as Mr. Chuoi whispered to his dog "…I will plant

it in a *pure place in my garden*, near the wishing well" (Phuoc 86). It implies the forest is less pure than Mr. Chuoi's garden. At the end of the story, the tree magically uprooted itself and flew away from the garden indicating that the garden is not where the tree belonged to.

Mr. Chuoi, the main human character, is assigned as the subject in the actantial analysis. The object that he wanted to pursue was to possess and tend the magical banyan tree. The tree is objectified. The sender in the narrative structure is Mr. Choui's knowledge, that the magical tree can cure many people. Mr. Chuoi's wife serves as the helper. As a helper, the wife took care of the banyan tree by watering the tree with clean water from the wishing well. The opponent is the dirty water. For some time, Mr. Chuoi was successful in pursuing the object. He becomes the receiver in the story. The tree grew well in his garden, and he got benefits from the magical tree.

Ecocentric Reading: Human, Animal, and Plant Interconnectedness and Interdependence

The folktales show strong anthropocentric nuances but cannot erase the hints of human-nature interconnectedness and interdependence in the narratives. Although animals and plants are positioned and assigned as objects or opponents of humans, the mentioning of animals and plants is the first clue indicating their unerasable existence. The mention also leaves a trace to follow in understanding the Indigenous knowledge of the people about animals and plants. In this section, I will show that animals and plants in the folktales are significant textually and in practice. Without them, the tales would not be coherent. In addition, animals and plants in the folktales are related and supported by immense supernatural power. The supernatural powers strengthen the significant positions of animals and plants in society as represented in the folktales. Thus, on the one hand, they are dependent on humans. On the other hand, they have their agency and voices, and humans are dependent on them. Humans, animals, and plants are not only interconnected but also interdependent on one another. The interdependence among humans, animals, and plants challenges the anthropocentric dominance of humans over non-humans. In this part also, I will connect and find a resemblance between the folktales' anthropocentric narrative structure and the geographical and social contexts of the regions to fill in the ecocriticism to seek clues of "ecological implication and human-nature relationship in *any* literary text" (Slovic 27)

The Komodo dragon, *Varanus komodoensis,* is an endemic animal in lesser Sunda regions including Komodo, Rinca, Nusa Kode, Gili Montang, and Flores islands (Ariefiandy et al. 2; Forth 289). Hocknull et al. conducted research tracing the fossils of lizards and concluded that *Varanus komodoensis* was originally from Australia and moved to Indonesian islands (13). The evidence was taken from the fossil records, and the claim is scientifically strong. The research brings insights into the history and evolution of the dragon. However, such research might bring little explanation of how

the people of the island view and live with the dragons. Shine and Somaweera explore more on the dragons' evolutionary survival strategies and the factors influencing their survival. The researchers also mention that human colonization brought impacts on the dragons' habits (6). Both types of research by Hocknull et al. and Shine and Somaweera do not suggest reciprocal relations between humans and dragons. Further, the speciesism nuances indicate human-animal separation. The objectification of the dragon serves as a common clue of anthropocentric practices. An ecocritical reading of the tale should spotlight the way people on Komodo Island view Komodo as part of their lives and how Komodo dragons impact their lives as depicted textually in the folktales. The folktale provides hints about Indigenous knowledge, i.e., more interdependent relationship between humans and animals as compared to the research conducted by Hocknull et al. and Shine and Somaweera.

In the first folktale, the important interdependent relationships between humans and animals are shown by the mention of the animal in the title and the blood relationship between the human and animal characters. The dragon lives with the people and shares prey. The habit of sharing food with the dragons is affirmed by Pak Sidiq, a local deer hunter from Rinca island (Sudibyo 149). The dragon also has a name, and the name is from a local language. This naming breaks the speciesism nuance brought by Western tradition. The name indicates the inclusion of the dragon to be a part of the family. Orah's desire in the story is not clearly described or depicted in the story. However, in the story, Orah is the sister of the human character, Si Gerong. The family accepted the dragon as part of the family as mentioned "Only her father and her brother Si Gerong showed he love. In fact, Si Gerong preferred to play with his sister than with the other children. The two would climb trees together…" (Langenheim 43). In the beginning, the people in the village are suspicious of Orah, but at the end of the story they accepted and treated Orah with kindness. Their attitude changes after knowing that humans and animals are siblings as told by a radiant figure of a woman saying that they were equal. Therefore, the story shows that humans and animals are closely interconnected with one another. They pay respect to one another and share living spaces. Greimas' actantial analysis is insufficient to map the motives of the dragon's actions and behavior such as her leaving the house. Attempting to centralize the dragon in the narrative structure by assigning the dragon as the subject in the actantial analysis configuration would only strengthen the separation of humans and animals suggesting that they belong to different spaces of living.

The story of Lo Aget and his cat shows the relationship between humans and animal to maintain human's care and responsible attitude toward animals. In the story, Lo Aget is mentioned to share his meal with the cat. "Lo Aget always shared the meal with his pet, however little he had, and always kept the best morsels for it" (Thio 8). Lo Aget's and his cat's actions indicate that they seem to understand each other and pay reciprocal respect. Bloembergen observes some cats to understand what they want and finds out that cats seem to choose to stay with humans (215). I would speculate that the behavioral tendency to stay with humans underlies the choice of the animals in the folktale. To put this reciprocal relationship into the narrative structure, the cat can occupy the subject position in the actantial analysis.

It has a desire to be with the human. The story of the cat is supported by the beliefs of *Selaq*, a beautiful female supernatural being who can transform into an animal.

The story about Mr. Chuoi and the banyan tree from Vietnam does not include any indication of the specific region of Vietnam. However, the story indicates the Indigenous knowledge of the people in using medicinal plants. Collecting and using medicinal plants are two of many social practices in Vietnam (Chuong et al.). For instance, people in northern mountainous regions of Vietnam intercrop bananas and ginger for medicine as well as to prevent the soil from erosion (Son et al. 512). The people practice the planting based on their learned experiences, and it shows effective results. In the folktale, Mr. Chuoi also conducted a similar practice by using the banyan tree leaves for medicine, and it was effective. There was no specific reason why and how the leaves could heal anyone from their illness. The story presents how Mr.Chuoi preserved the tree for him because he needed the healing factor of the tree.

In the narrative structure, the tree, as an actant, can be assigned as the helper. The banyan tree helped Mr. Chuoi achieve his desire, to heal the woman character, who became his wife. The object is the healed woman. By assigning the banyan tree as the helper, humans and plants are depicted to have a reciprocal relationship. The relationship highlights the tree's agency and human's dependency on the tree.

The story about the origin of the Rafflesia flower shows people's belief in the unity of supernatural beings and the environment. The Indigenous belief appears in the mention of forest spirits and their spatial occupancy. The depiction of the forest spirit is similar to *gunig.* The spirits are told to appear in someone's dream. In the folktale, the princess also had "the strangest dream" and the servant told her about the spirits of the forest (Taylor 41). Focusing on the forest spirit, nature's agency is depicted by its influence on the princess' life. The forest contains imminent power that can even shift the princess's human form into a flower. The event when the spirit of the forest came into the princess' dream and shifted the princess' form cannot be assigned as the subject in Greimas' narrative structure. However, it challenges the human-nature separation in anthropocentric readings. Humans and plants are connected by their interaction. Even, they become a united entity after the princess transforms into a flower.

Conclusion and Constraints

This chapter spotlights the representation of Indigenous knowledge from Lombok Island, Komodo Island, the Malaysian peninsula, and Vietnam as portrayed in the selected folktales. The Indigenous knowledge depicted in the folktales talks about the human-animal and human-plant relationship. In addition, the analysis also shows that supernatural beings or powers are also evident in the tales. The folktales serve as forms of resistance against Western colonialism by challenging the separation of humans and nature. They show interconnectedness and interdependence among humans, animals, and plants. They also foreground plant and animal agency. The ecocritical reading provides a stage for the representations of Komodo dragons,

cats, medical banyan trees, and the Rafflesia flower in the folktales signifying the interconnected relationship among humans, animals, and plants.

Both anthropocentric and ecocentric nuances in the folktales are evident. The Indigenous knowledge may be anthropocentric both in practice and in the delivery of the tales. However, the ecocritical readings of the folktales have more power in presenting Indigenous knowledge in which humans and nature are perceived as interconnected and interdependent. On the other hand, anthropocentric readings tend to be moralistic and put aside environmental awareness, i.e., animals and plants are weighted only as properties and for the benefit of humans as previously suggested by Bellarsi, Lamichhane, and Shrivastava. This chapter suspects that the anthropocentric aspect of Indigenous knowledge is prone to capitalistic and political commodification and exploitation resulting in natural degradation as also suggested by Kidner.

More ecocentric readings in the folktale reading performance should be promoted more to conserve both Indigenous knowledge and also the environment. The analysis suggests that ecocentric readings endorse mutual and reciprocal respect between humans and nature. It proves what Fadzil showcases as the "value of sharing" and "co-dependency." Borrowing the concepts mentioned by Savage (265), the folktales also showcase respect and reciprocity aspects of Indigenous knowledge in depicting human-nature relationships. The analysis also shows what Sy mentions about the equal role and agency of humans and nature in *Ang Babayas sa Tagaytay* from the Philippines (185). For instance, the kinship relation between humans and Komodo shows how humans and animals can share living space and live side-by-side. The story of Ria who becomes a flower also depicts how humans and plants can communicate and share the living space. The value of sharing is portrayed by how Lo Aget and his cat share their meals. The reciprocity and co-dependency are also shown by Mr. Chuoi's need for banyan leaves. Those values and knowledge can challenge colonialism's effects on the environment.

This chapter supports the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in addressing environmental issues to decolonize practical conduct and policy making. As seen in the analysis, the characters in the folktales consider that they are inseparable from nature. Their actions will influence nature, and nature will impact their lives. For instance, the case of Mr. Chuoi and the banyan tree exemplifies how Mr. Chuoi preserves the banyan tree with care, and how the banyan tree provides magical leaves for Mr. Chuoi. In the story, Mr. Chuoi does not commodify the leaves to get economic benefits. Instead, Mr. Chuoi tends the tree with care by watering the tree with pure water. The values and teaching to pay respect to trees can be included in public policy or educational curricula. Besides their familiarity with the people and their feasibility to be included in the school curriculum, Indigenous knowledge serves relevant and specific methods in addressing issues in communities.

In addition to the findings, although this chapter does not specifically examine the role of supernatural powers and magics in the folktales, the challenge against Western domination is also supported by the role of supernatural powers and magic conducted by supernatural beings. Western rational culture marginalized magics as "magic has been seen to be trying to do what science does but is failing because it is based on false premises" (Greenwood 4-5). However, spiritual beliefs like magics

cannot be separated from Indigenous people's ecological knowledge. In the folktales, supernatural powers are also attached to the animals and plants.

The narrative structure analysis using Greimas' actantial analysis is not always applicable to peruse ecocentric standpoints in reading the folktales. It is more applicable to provide justification for anthropocentric readings rather than the ecocentric ones. In anthropocentric readings, the actants can be mapped in a coherent configuration but the framework cannot fully be applicable to read the folktales ecocritically. Indigenous knowledge sometimes does not provide clear reasons and desires motivating something to happen. For instance, in the story of the Komodo dragon, there is no explanation for why humans could have an animal daughter. There is also no clear elaboration on how and why the tree in the story of Mr. Choui magically healed people and flew away to the moon. The desires of Father and Mother cat in the tales of Lo Aget and of the spirit of the forest in Ria's garden are also left unexplained. Those mysterious and unexplained happenings in the folktales are important and difficult to erase. They are needed to keep the tales intact and as clues to Indigenous knowledge in social practices.

This chapter peruses the textual interpretation from the choice of words and the narrative structure of some circulated folktales from Southeast Asia. Hopefully, this research can trigger more rigorous observation in voicing Indigenous knowledge from the regions and provide a space for them to challenge colonial domination.

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