REPRESENTATION OF UNIVERSAL VALUES IN FOLKTALES AS A SOURCE OF INDONESIAN LANGUAGE LEARNING FROM A PERENNIALISM PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian language learning requires learning sources that convey moral values contextually and remain relevant across time. This study aimed to describe the representation of universal values in Indonesian folktales and their implications as a learning source for Indonesian language education from the perspective of perennialism. The study employed a descriptive qualitative method with a content analysis approach. The data sources were two folktales, *"Malin Kundang"* and *"Bawang Merah Bawang Putih"*. The data, consisting of narrative and dialogue excerpts, were collected through reading and note-taking, then analyzed through identification, classification, interpretation, and conclusion drawing based on five values: honesty, responsibility, justice, caring, and wisdom. The results showed that all five values appeared in both tales, with responsibility being the most frequent. The values emerged when characters upheld them, or when characters violated them and bore the consequences. It was concluded that both tales contain universal values that can be traced through dialogue, actions, and the consequences of events, so they can be used as a learning source for Indonesian language education. These findings are limited to the two tales analyzed

Keywords : *Content Analysis; Malin Kundang; Bawang Merah Bawang Putih; Honesty; Responsibility*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian language learning aims not only to equip learners with language skills but also to shape character through the texts they study. The rapid flow of digital information is often not matched by a firm grounding in moral values among learners. Values such as honesty, responsibility, and caring are frequently discussed in the curriculum, yet they are not always present in meaningful ways in learning materials that are close to students' cultural experiences. This condition calls for learning sources that can present values contextually while remaining relevant across time.

Folktales are a potential source for this purpose. As a part of oral folklore, folktales are passed down across generations and carry the worldview of the communities that own them (Danandjaja, 1984). Their narratives, characters, and dialogues present conflicts and moral decisions in a simple way, so they are easy to understand and can be used in literature learning (Suninica et al., 2024). In addition to carrying local values, folktales also display values that go beyond regional boundaries, such as the consequences of lying, the obligation to bear the results of one's own actions, and the conflict between justice and arbitrariness. Such values can be called universal values, namely values whose truth is recognized by people across various cultural backgrounds. Recent research even shows that regional folktales contain adaptations of universal values in local contexts (Nasution et al., 2025). The idea of enduring values is in line with perennialism. This philosophy of education emphasizes universal and eternal values derived from reason and revelation as a guide to truth (Kartika, 2025). From this perspective, long-lasting cultural heritage, including folktales, deserves to be a means of shaping learners' intellect and morals. Perennialism thus provides a conceptual basis for assessing why folktales matter in Indonesian language learning, not merely as reading material but as a vehicle for passing on fundamental values.

Several previous studies have examined folktales from the perspectives of values and learning. Halimah & Komalasari (2026) analyzed a collection of Nusantara folktales using a literary anthropology approach and found 198 data points of local wisdom grouped into the aspects of peace and prosperity. Honesty, harmony, and mutual cooperation were among them, and the findings were considered relevant as teaching material. In the domain of learning. Afrodita et al. (2025) showed that reinterpreting folktales into children's stories effectively improved the creative writing skills of Indonesian language education students while internalizing local cultural values. Both studies view the values of folktales as local wisdom or regional cultural content. No study has yet read them as universal values through the lens of perennialism and linked them to Indonesian language learning.

Based on the above explanation, this study aimed to describe the representation of universal values in Indonesian folktales and their implications as a learning source for Indonesian language education from the perspective of perennialism. Five values became the focus of analysis, namely honesty (behavior of speaking and acting in accordance with the truth), responsibility (willingness to accept the consequences of one's actions), justice (treatment of others that is not arbitrary), caring (attention to the conditions and needs of others), and wisdom (the ability to make decisions based on moral considerations). This study used a descriptive qualitative method with a content analysis approach, as commonly used in literary studies (Aminah & Nuraeni, 2024). The data, in

the form of narrative and dialogue excerpts containing universal values, were collected through reading, note-taking, and documentation, then analyzed through the stages of identification, classification, interpretation, and conclusion drawing.

The results are expected to provide a theoretical contribution in the form of a mapping of universal values in folktales through the perspective of perennialism. The results are also practically beneficial for teachers in selecting and developing Indonesian language teaching materials that carry values. In addition, this study raises follow-up questions, namely how these values are received by learners and how their relationship with learning outcomes can be empirically tested.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative research type with a content analysis approach. (Moleong, 2021; Sugiyono, 2019). This approach was chosen because the study aimed to describe, in depth, the universal values contained in folktale texts in the form of words and sentences, not numbers (Halimah & Komalasari, 2026). The object of the study was Indonesian folktales, and the data were narrative and dialogue excerpts containing universal values. The data sources were two folktales, "Malin Kundang" and "Bawang Merah Bawang Putih," taken from the book *Kumpulan Cerita Rakyat Nusantara (Legenda)*. (Bintoro, 2010). The data sources were selected purposively based on three considerations: (1) the tales originate from diverse regions; (2) they contain clear moral conflicts in the characters; and (3) they are written in Indonesian, so they can be used as teaching material. The researcher acted as the main instrument. The supporting instrument was a data analysis table containing columns for the story title, data code, excerpt, type of value, and interpretation.

The analysis focused on five universal values. Honesty is the behavior of speaking and acting in accordance with the truth. Responsibility is the willingness to accept the consequences of one's actions. Justice is treatment of others that is not arbitrary. Caring is attention to the conditions and needs of others. Wisdom is the ability to make decisions based on moral considerations. These definitions served as a guide in determining whether an excerpt qualified as data. An excerpt was categorized as data when a character's actions, words, or decisions clearly reflected one of these values, either directly or through the consequences experienced by the character.

Data were collected through reading-note-taking and documentation techniques. The researcher read all the stories carefully and repeatedly. The researcher then recorded narrative and dialogue excerpts containing universal values and entered them into an analysis table along with the story identity and data code. Data collection was carried out in November 2026. Data analysis followed four stages: (1) identification, (2) classification, (3) interpretation, and (4) conclusion drawing, which are in line with the content analysis flow of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. (Miles et al., 2014). At the identification stage, the researcher marked excerpts containing values. At the classification stage, the excerpts were grouped into the five values based on the operational definitions. At the interpretation stage, the meaning of each excerpt was read within the context of the story and interpreted through the perspective of perennialism, namely the permanence and validity of values across time and cultures. The results of this explanation were

then linked to the opportunities for using the stories as a source of Indonesian language learning. At the conclusion drawing stage, the researcher formulated findings on the forms of representation of each value and their implications for learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the two folktales yielded 19 data points containing universal values, consisting of 8 data points in "Malin Kundang" and 11 data points in "Bawang Merah Bawang Putih". All five values that were the focus of the study were found in both tales. The most data related to responsibility (6 data points), followed by caring and wisdom (4 data points each), justice (3 data points), and honesty (2 data points). Examples of the data and their forms of representation are presented in Table 1. The number of data points shows how often a value appeared in these two texts, not how important the value is.

Table 1. Data and Forms of Representation of Universal Values in the Folktales "Malin Kundang" and "Bawang Merah Bawang Putih"

Value	Story Title	Data	Form of Representasion
Honesty	*Malin Kundang*	*"Aku bukan anakmu! Pergilah!"* (I am not your son! Go away!)	Violated: Malin denied his mother because he was ashamed of his poor origins, so his words did not match reality.
Honesty	*Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*	*"Akhirnya, mereka sadar akan kesalahan mereka. Mereka meminta maaf kepada Bawang Putih dan berjanji akan berubah."* (In the end, they realized their mistakes. They apologized to Bawang Putih and promised to change.	Upheld: both characters openly admitted their mistakes after bearing the consequences.
Responsibility	Malin Kundang	*Janji "Aku akan kembali membawa harta untuk kita berdua, ibu" tidak ditepati The promise "Aku akan kembali membawa harta untuk kita berdua, ibu"* ("I	Violated: Malin did not return or send news to his mother after becoming rich, so his promise was neglected

Value	Story Title	Data	Form of Representasion
		will return bringing treasure for the two of us, Mother") was not kept.	
Responsibility	Bawang Merah Bawang Putih	*Bawang Putih "panik dan segera menyusuri sungai"* ("panicked and immediately followed the river") to look for the clothes that had been swept away.	Upheld: Bawang Putih regarded the loss of the clothes as her responsibility and tried to put it right
Justice	Malin Kundang	*"Kapal hancur dan tubuh Malin menjadi batu"* (The ship was destroyed and Malin's body turned into stone)	Upheld through consequences: Malin's disrespectful act toward his mother was repaid with a fitting punishment.
Justice	Bawang Merah Bawang Putih	*Ibu tiri "selalu membela Bawang Merah" dan memarahi Bawang Putih tanpa alasan* (The stepmother always took Bawang Merah's side and scolded Bawang Putih for no reason).	Violated: the stepmother treated the two girls differently and scolded Bawang Putih without clear grounds.
Caring	Malin Kundang	*"Malin... Malin anakku! Ibu rindu padamu!"* ("Malin... Malin, my son! Mother misses you!")	Upheld by the mother and neglected by Malin: the mother showed love and longing, while Malin did not return it.
Caring	Bawang Merah	*"Bawang Putih membantu nenek, sedangkan Bawang*	Contrast between characters: Bawang Putih paid attention to the old woman's

Value	Story Title	Data	Form of Representasion
	Bawang Putih	*Merah tidak mau membantu"* (Bawang Putih helped the old woman, while Bawang Merah refused to help).	needs, while Bawang Merah was rude and refused to help.
Wisdom	Malin Kundang	*"Malin malu pada asal usulnya dan memprioritaskan kekayaan serta status sosial"* (Malin was ashamed of his origins and prioritized wealth and social status).	Violated: Malin's decision was based on shame and a desire for status, not on moral consideration toward his mother.
Wisdom	Bawang Merah Bawang Putih	*Bawang Putih "tidak mau serakah" dan memaafkan* (Bawang Putih did not want to be greedy and forgave).	Upheld: Bawang Putih chose what was sufficient and forgave, so her decision was based on moral consideration rather than a desire for wealth.

The forms of representation in Table 1 show that the five values appeared in two ways: characters either upheld them or violated them. In "Malin Kundang", four values appeared through violation. Malin denied his mother because he was ashamed of his origins, so his words did not match reality (honesty). He did not return or send news after becoming rich, so his promise was neglected (responsibility). He did not return his mother's love and longing (caring). His decision was also based on shame and a desire for status, not on moral consideration toward his mother (wisdom). Justice in this tale appeared through consequences, as Malin's disrespectful act was repaid with the destruction of his ship and the transformation of his body into stone. Caring was upheld only by the mother.

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In "Bawang Merah Bawang Putih", the values appeared through a contrast between two sides. Bawang Putih upheld responsibility by regarding the loss of the clothes as her own responsibility and trying to put it right. She paid attention to the old woman's needs, chose what was sufficient, and forgave. In contrast, the stepmother violated justice by treating the two girls

differently and scolding Bawang Putih without clear grounds, while Bawang Merah was rude and refused to help the old woman. Honesty was upheld at the end of the tale, when the stepmother and Bawang Merah openly admitted their mistakes after bearing the consequences. This difference in pattern explains why wisdom was found more often in "Bawang Merah Bawang Putih" (3 data points) than in "Malin Kundang" (1 data point). In the former, the value appeared as an action chosen by a character, while in the latter it appeared mostly through its absence.

The first main finding is that responsibility was the most frequent value, and justice appeared mainly as a consequence of characters' actions. Both tales rest on the relationship between actions and their consequences, so responsibility and justice appeared side by side. According to perennialism, moral values are universal and eternal (Kartika, 2023). The same pattern, namely actions that bring fitting consequences, in two tales with different settings is in line with this view. However, the data come from only two tales, so this agreement cannot be extended into a conclusion about Indonesian folktales in general. Honesty had the fewest data points (2 data points). With data this small, the findings are not sufficient to conclude that honesty is less important in folktales. It may simply not be the core of the conflict in these two tales.

These findings are in line with previous studies reporting that folktales contain moral values close to learners' lives. (Maulidia et al., 2025) analyzed the content of the Bawang Merah Bawang Putih tale and concluded that it remains relevant as a medium for character learning. Ayu et al. (2025) identified caring, honesty, and compassion as values in the same tale. Kusuma & Nurzaman (2024), who examined "Malin Kundang" together with two other tales, concluded that the emotional influence of folktales strengthens the internalization of values in children. The difference lies in how the values are read. Those studies view the values as moral content for character education, and Afrodita et al. (2025) treat them as local cultural content. This study reads them as universal values through the lens of perennialism. Behavior such as filial devotion can be read as a value specific to a particular culture, but in this study it was formulated through more general values, namely responsibility and caring. This reading is only one possible interpretation. A reader who emphasizes the Minangkabau cultural context of "Malin Kundang" may interpret the punishment of turning into stone as a customary or religious teaching rather than an expression of universal justice. The data of this study cannot rule out that alternative explanation.

For Indonesian language learning, the forms of representation in Table 1 show that values can be traced through concrete parts of the text, namely character dialogue, narrated actions, and the consequences of events. The contrast between actions that uphold and actions that violate values can be used by teachers to examine characters through their dialogue and actions, compare the decisions of two characters, or rewrite the story from another character's point of view. Similar activities, namely reading and discussing the story, role-playing, and reflecting on students' personal experiences, were reported by Ayu et al. (2025). This use remains a possibility read from the texts, because this study did not test its application in the classroom. This study has several limitations. The data come from only two tales, the codes were determined by a single researcher, and the text analyzed is one version of tales that exist in many versions in society. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized, and other versions may produce different patterns. Future research could increase the number and variety of tales, involve more than one coder to test the consistency of the classification, and empirically examine learners' reception and the effect of using these tales on learning outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

The five universal values honesty, responsibility, justice, compassion, and wisdom are evident in the folktales "*Malin Kundang*" and "*Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*." These values emerge in two ways: characters either uphold them or violate them, with the consequences of such violations serving as lessons for readers. Responsibility and justice are the most prominent values because both stories emphasize the relationship between actions and their consequences. Wisdom is more clearly reflected in the choices made by the characters in "*Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*," whereas in "*Malin Kundang*," it is illustrated through its absence. The similar patterns found in these two different stories are consistent with the perennialist perspective that moral values are universal and transcend time.

These findings are significant for Indonesian language teachers because they demonstrate that moral values can be identified through concrete textual elements, including dialogue, character actions, and the consequences of events. Folktales can therefore serve as learning resources that integrate reading and textual analysis with character development. The novelty of this study lies in its approach to interpreting folktales through the lens of perennialism, rather than focusing solely on local wisdom or character education. These conclusions are limited to the two stories analyzed. Future research should investigate whether similar patterns can be identified in other folktales and whether their use in classroom instruction genuinely helps students understand these values.

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