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*Corresponding Author
wshandayani@edu.uir.ac.id
Wilda Srihastuty Handayani

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Transforming Oral Literature into Educational Media: Integrating Character Values in Indonesian Language Learning

**Erni¹, Wilda Srihastuty Handayani Piliang^{2*},
Ridha Hasnul Ulya³, Rika Fatmadona⁴**

^{1, 2}Universitas Islam Riau, Indonesia

³Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia

⁴Prince of Songkla University, Thailand

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengidentifikasi nilai-nilai karakter dalam cerita rakyat Pelalawan serta merancang model pembelajaran berbasis kearifan lokal untuk memperkuat pendidikan karakter siswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Peneliti menganalisis dua cerita rakyat, yaitu "Rantai Emas dari Dasar Sungai" dan "Kisah Ketobong Keramat" yang dikumpulkan melalui dokumentasi. Teknik analisis yang digunakan adalah konten interaktif. Hasil menunjukkan nilai-nilai seperti kesederhanaan, keikhlasan, rendah hati, tanggung jawab, dan ketaatan pada norma moral. Simpulan penelitian menegaskan potensi cerita rakyat sebagai media edukatif yang efektif dalam pembelajaran bahasa dan sastra untuk membentuk karakter siswa secara kontekstual.

Kata Kunci: transformasi, karakter, sastra lisan, bahasa dan sastra Indonesia

Abstract

This study aims to identify character values embedded in the folktales of Pelalawan and to design a locally grounded instructional model to strengthen students' character education. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed. The researchers analyzed two folktales, "The Golden Chain from the Riverbed" and "The Tale of the Sacred Ketobong" collected through documentary sources. Interactive content analysis was used as the analytical technique. Findings reveal character values such as simplicity, sincerity, humility, responsibility, and adherence to moral norms. The study concludes that folktales hold significant potential as effective educational media in Indonesian language and literature instruction, offering a contextual approach to character formation among students.

Keywords: transformation, character, oral literature, Indonesian language and literature

Transforming Oral Literature into Educational Media: Integrating Character Values in Indonesian Language Learning

Introduction

Social change in the era of globalization has had a significant impact on the behavior of young people, particularly school-aged adolescents. Research data indicate that 65% of junior high school students admit to skipping school, 25% have been involved in drug abuse, 40% have participated in physical fights, and approximately 11% have engaged in criminal acts such as vandalism or theft (Mulyana et al., 2023). Fenomena ini menggambarkan adanya krisis moral yang melanda kalangan remaja. These phenomena reflect a moral crisis among adolescents. The erosion of positive values, such as honesty, tolerance, diligence, and mutual cooperation is among the primary factors contributing to the high incidence of deviant behavior among students (Muslich, 2022). In this context, education plays a strategic role in offering solutions grounded in local cultural values to strengthen students' character (Haerul & Yusrina, 2024).

One potential approach to addressing this moral crisis is the integration of character values into Indonesian language and literature instruction through folktales (Hasanah & Efendi, 2024). Folktales constitute an oral cultural heritage rich in noble values and local wisdom (Sintian & Malim, 2019). In the Pelalawan region, for instance, numerous folktales convey moral messages concerning honesty, hard work, mutual assistance, and communal cooperation. These values are highly relevant for students, as their teaching not only aims to preserve local culture but also enhances students' understanding of the importance of upholding ethical traditions in everyday life. Consequently, folktales can serve as an effective medium for the internalization of character values within the school environment (Manalu et al., 2025).

However, the utilization of folktales as a learning medium has not yet been fully optimized (Sardila et al., 2024). Preliminary observations reveal several obstacles hindering the implementation of character values derived from folktales into the school curriculum. First, there is a lack of comprehensive identification of character values embedded in Pelalawan folktales that align with the secondary education curriculum standards. Second, there is a scarcity of specifically designed instructional models that effectively leverage folktales as a vehicle for character internalization. Third, teachers' limited understanding of how to develop instructional materials based on Pelalawan's local wisdom presents a significant challenge. Finally, the absence of standardized assessment instruments to measure the effectiveness of character value integration through folktales in instruction results in suboptimal learning evaluation (Gani et al., 2023).

This study is further supported by the urgent need to preserve local culture amid modernization trends that often marginalize traditional values. Local culture, including folktales is not merely a form of entertainment or historical narrative; it also serves as a source of inspiration for individual character formation (Pramayasa et al., 2024). Through folktales, students can learn how their ancestors lived by strong moral principles. This fosters a deeper

understanding of their own cultural roots and cultivates a sense of appreciation for local wisdom. In other words, folktales can function as a bridge connecting the past and the future to nurture a generation that is creative and open-minded (Alwi et al., 2025; Andriyani et al., 2024; Liusti et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2025).

Although previous studies have consistently demonstrated the potential of oral literature as a medium for character education, a significant gap remains in terms of *contextual implementation and pedagogical operationalisation*. Research by Lizawati and Uli (2018) primarily focuses on identifying and describing character values embedded in oral literature within higher education contexts, without extending the analysis to structured classroom models or measurable instructional outcomes (Lizawati & Uli, 2018). Similarly, Rakhmi (2020) emphasises the cultural and ethical functions of oral literature in post-pandemic education, highlighting its role in preserving cultural values amid technological disruption, yet stops short of proposing concrete instructional frameworks or assessment instruments for school-based learning (Rakhmi, 2020). As a result, character education through oral literature remains largely conceptual, with limited guidance on how values are systematically internalised, practiced, and evaluated within formal language and literature classrooms.

Furthermore, existing studies have not sufficiently addressed *local specificity and curriculum alignment*. While (Lubis, 2017) and related works acknowledge folklore as a source of moral instruction, they tend to generalise Indonesian oral traditions without deeply engaging with region-specific narratives or their direct relevance to contemporary curriculum demands. In particular, Pelalawan folktales have rarely been examined as structured instructional media that align with secondary education competencies and character education objectives. This gap highlights the need for research that not only identifies character values in local folktales but also translates them into an applicable learning model supported by clear indicators and assessment tools. Addressing this gap is essential to move character education beyond theoretical discourse toward a practical, context-based approach that enables students to meaningfully apply moral values in their daily lives, while simultaneously strengthening engagement through culturally resonant narratives (Lizawati & Uli, 2018; Lubis, 2017; Rakhmi, 2020).

This research also aligns with the national education vision, which emphasizes character education as an integral component of teaching and learning. Current curricula provide space for character development through subjects such as language and literature (Sidabutar, 2024). However, implementation has largely remained theoretical, lacking in-depth practical approaches. By employing Pelalawan folktales as an instructional medium, it is hoped that students will not only grasp moral values abstractly but also apply them meaningfully in daily life. Moreover, this approach may enhance student motivation and engagement, as folktales are typically delivered in compelling and accessible narrative forms.

This study aims to comprehensively identify the character values embedded in Pelalawan folktales, develop a relevant instructional model, and produce a standardized instrument to assess the effectiveness of character value implementation. It is expected to serve as an initial step toward developing a culturally grounded model of language and literature instruction. The

findings will benefit students and teachers in secondary schools in Riau and may also be adapted by other educational institutions across Indonesia. Thus, this research seeks to make a tangible contribution to education, particularly in strengthening student character development through a local cultural approach.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to examine character values embedded in Pelalawan folktales and their relevance to secondary-level language and literature instruction. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research seeks to interpret meanings, moral messages, and cultural symbols contained in oral narratives rather than to measure variables statistically (Lizawati & Uli, 2018). In line with a descriptive-analytic orientation, this study focuses on understanding how local oral literature functions as an educational medium for character formation within a specific cultural context (Rakhmi, 2020).

The data sources were selected purposively based on clearly defined criteria. First, the folktales had to originate from the Pelalawan region and be recognised as part of its oral cultural heritage. Second, the narratives were required to contain explicit or implicit character values relevant to character education, such as sincerity, humility, responsibility, self-restraint, and obedience to moral or spiritual norms. Third, the folktales needed to be available in documented or written form to ensure analytical consistency and textual reliability. Based on these criteria, "The Golden Chain from the Riverbed" and "The Legend of Ketobong Keramat" were selected as primary data sources because they reflect local wisdom while addressing ethical issues that remain relevant to contemporary educational settings (Lizawati & Uli, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted through a thematic coding process consisting of three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Saldana, 2014). In the open coding stage, the folktale texts were read repeatedly to identify narrative units, character actions, dialogues, and symbolic elements related to moral and character values. These units were labelled with initial codes such as greed, simplicity, sincerity, humility, responsibility, and self-control.

In the axial coding stage, the initial codes were examined to identify relationships and patterns among them. Related codes were then grouped into broader categories of character values, allowing the researcher to connect narrative events with their ethical meanings. Finally, in the selective coding stage, core themes were refined and integrated into a coherent framework explaining how Pelalawan folktales convey character education messages. This process enabled a systematic interpretation of folktales as pedagogical resources for moral and character development (Saldana, 2014).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study addressed credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with the data, repeated reading of the folktales, and careful interpretation of narrative contexts to ensure that character values were understood holistically and culturally grounded (Rakhmi, 2020). Peer discussions with colleagues in language and literature education were also

conducted to strengthen interpretative accuracy. Dependability was ensured by applying a transparent and systematic research procedure, particularly in data selection and coding stages, allowing the research process to be logically traced and reviewed (Lizawati & Uli, 2018). Confirmability was maintained by grounding all interpretations in textual evidence from the folktales and by consistently using narrative excerpts to support analytical claims, thereby minimising researcher bias and ensuring that conclusions were derived directly from the data (Saldana, 2014).

Results

Exploration of Character Values in the Folktale “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed”

The folktale “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” portrays its protagonist, Pak Nelayan (the Fisherman), as initially a diligent and humble individual who ultimately succumbs to greed, the central theme of the narrative. At the outset, Pak Nelayan is depicted as a fisherman living in poverty yet persistently working to support his family. This is evident in the opening paragraph: “Once upon a time, in Negeri Rantau Baru, Pelalawan, Riau, there lived a poor fisherman and his wife.” His strong work ethic is further demonstrated when he follows the instruction from his dream and journeys to a sacred spring (second paragraph). Through these actions, Pak Nelayan embodies the values of simplicity and a steadfast work ethic.

However, his greed emerges when he discovers a massive golden chain at the end of a rope pulled from the river. Rather than feeling content with his discovery, he continues pulling the rope in hopes of extracting even greater wealth. As stated in the fourth paragraph: “Pak Nelayan ignored the warning call of the Murai bird. Instead, he pulled the rope faster, hoping to retrieve even more golden chain.” This moment illustrates how material temptation can lead individuals to abandon fundamental principles such as modesty and self-contentment.

The consequences of Pak Nelayan’s greed are clearly articulated in the narrative. As he greedily pulls the rope, bubbles rise from the riverbed, gradually transforming into a massive wave: “Suddenly, bubbles emerged from the river, growing into enormous waves... Without warning, a huge wave capsized Pak Nelayan’s boat” (sixth paragraph). His boat is swept away and sinks, leaving him with nothing to show for his efforts. As a direct result of his avarice, Pak Nelayan returns home empty-handed and filled with regret: “Such was the fate of Pak Nelayan, he could only lament his greed” (ninth paragraph). The story thus conveys a profound moral lesson: every action carries consequences, whether positive or negative. Pak Nelayan’s greed not only cost him a valuable opportunity but also brought tangible hardship into his life.

Ultimately, “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” offers a compelling reflection on self-awareness and self-restraint. Through Pak Nelayan’s character, readers are invited to contemplate core values such as humility, diligence, and acceptance of one’s limits. Furthermore, the tale underscores the dangers of materialism, illustrating how the pursuit of worldly wealth can lead to both physical and spiritual loss, thereby serving as a cautionary reminder against yielding to temptation.

Table 1. Data on Character Values in Folktale *The Golden Chain from the Riverbed*

No.	Quotation	Character Value	Context and Meaning
1.	"Once upon a time, in Negeri Rantau Baru, Pelalawan, Riau, there lived a fisherman and his wife who lived in poverty."	Hard work, perseverance, never giving up	The Fisherman is depicted as a man living in poverty who nevertheless works hard to earn a living.
2.	"With the strength he possessed, he pulled the rope further, and further, and further..."	Hard work, perseverance, never giving up	With great persistence, the Fisherman continues to pull the rope to obtain the golden chain. However, this persistence is driven by a fierce greed.
3.	"The following morning, the Fisherman returned to the scene of the previous day's events. He hoped to find something there..."	Hard work, perseverance, never giving up	Despite failing, the Fisherman does not give up. He tries again to obtain the golden chain. This demonstrates a spirit of never giving up and continuous hard work, albeit in a misguided context.
4.	"The Fisherman set off towards the spring as described in his dream."	Hard work, perseverance, never giving up	The Fisherman acts immediately based on a dream, showing initiative and a readiness to work rather than merely hoping.
5.	"The Fisherman ignored the chirping of the magpie. Instead, he pulled the rope even faster in the hope of obtaining even more of the golden chain."	Freedom from greed	The Fisherman's nature is revealed when he finds a large golden chain at the end of the rope. Instead of being satisfied with what he has found, he continues to pull the rope in the hope of gaining more wealth.
6.	"Such was the fate of the Fisherman; he could only regret his greed."	Freedom from greed	This regret confirms that greed is harmful; thus, the story teaches the value of not being greedy through the negative consequences of avarice.
7.	"He returned to his hut empty-handed."	Freedom from greed	As a direct result of greed (despite the potential to gain gold), the Fisherman instead loses everything, including his boat. This emphasises that greed destroys what is already possessed.
8.	"Suddenly, water bubbles emerged from the river,	Self-control	When the Fisherman continues to pull the rope greedily, bubbles

	which gradually turned into a great wave... Unexpectedly, the great wave suddenly capsized the Fisherman's boat."	emerge from the riverbed and turn into a massive wave.
9.	"The Fisherman ignored the chirping of a magpie that told him to quickly cut the chain."	Self-control Had the Fisherman exercised self-control and listened to the advice, he could have saved part of the golden chain. This failure teaches the importance of self-control.

Exploration of Character Values in the Folktale “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat”

The folktale “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat” centers on Bomo Sakti, a protagonist characterized by sincerity, humility, and a strong sense of moral responsibility, yet also confronted by internal conflict stemming from the violation of spiritual norms. The following presents a detailed analysis of Bomo Sakti’s character.

Sincerity and compassion are defining traits of Bomo Sakti. Despite his poverty, he consistently helps others without expectation of reward: “Though poor, he never refused anyone who sought his help. He assisted wholeheartedly, never asking for anything in return” (third paragraph). His selflessness earns him the love and respect of the Pelalawan community, reflecting core local values of mutual aid (gotong royong) and social solidarity that form an integral part of the region’s cultural heritage.

Even after being appointed as the royal healer and gaining widespread fame, Bomo Sakti remains humble. This is illustrated in the tenth paragraph: “Although his name became known far and wide, Bomo Sakti remained humble. He continued his old routine of fishing in the Selempaya River.” His humility demonstrates that success did not alienate him from his roots or the simple values he had long upheld.

Bomo Sakti also exhibits a profound sense of moral responsibility when summoned by the king to heal the queen. Aware of the grave spiritual consequences of defying his teacher’s prohibition, he nonetheless complies out of concern for his family’s safety: “Hearing the king’s threat, Bomo Sakti grew fearful. For the sake of his own life and that of his family, he reluctantly obeyed the king’s command” (twentieth paragraph). This act reveals his deep care not only for himself but also for his loved ones.

However, his transgression carries significant spiritual repercussions. His teacher’s prohibition is clearly stated: “He was forbidden to heal those who were healthy or those who were already dead. Should he violate this rule, his life would be plagued by suffering” (fifteenth paragraph). This underscores that ancestral norms are not arbitrary rules but sacred guidelines for ethical living. Bomo Sakti is thus burdened with severe spiritual consequences for his actions. After violating the prohibition twice, Bomo Sakti is compelled to leave the human world of Pelalawan and exists thereafter as a supernatural being. The final paragraph notes: “Since that event, the local community has believed that Bomo Sakti continues to live as an orang hunian (a spirit-being).” His departure from the mortal realm signifies the inescapable gravity of violating spiritual taboos.

Through Bomo Sakti, the folktale imparts rich moral teachings. He exemplifies sincerity, humility, and moral integrity. Yet the narrative also emphasizes the necessity of adhering to spiritual and ethical boundaries. Bomo Sakti's story invites readers to reflect on the delicate balance between personal duty, social responsibility, and reverence for the traditional values passed down by ancestors, values that continue to serve as moral anchors in an evolving world.

Table 2. Data on Character Values in Folktale *The Legend of Ketobong Keramat*

No.	Quotation	Character Value	Context and Meaning
1.	"Although he lived in poverty, he never refused anyone who came seeking help. He helped sincerely, without ever asking for a reward."	Sincerity	Bomo Sakti is depicted as a figure who always helps others without asking for anything in return.
2.	"It is God who heals them; I am only trying to do so."	Sincerity	Bomo Sakti does not claim credit for his own abilities but attributes the outcome to God's will. This is a form of sincerity in spiritual attitude.
3.	"Despite his name being famous everywhere, Bomo Sakti remained humble. He still carried out his former work, which was catching fish in the Selempaya river."	Humility	Bomo Sakti's humble attitude shows that success did not make him forget his origins or abandon the simple values he had always held dear.
4.	"A thousand pardons, Your Majesty! I am but a poor and ignorant man. It is God who heals them; I am only trying to do so," Bomo Sakti replied humbly."	Humility	Bomo Sakti's humble attitude after successfully helping the King's child.
5.	"He vowed not to step on the soil of Pelalawan for as long as he lived."	Humility	Bomo Sakti chose to exile himself rather than receive excessive honours. This is proof that he did not seek praise or status.
6.	"Hearing the threat from the King, Bomo Sakti became frightened. For the sake of his safety and that of his family, he was forced to obey his King's wishes."	Responsibility	Bomo Sakti also shows high moral responsibility when asked by the King to heal the Queen. Despite knowing the great risk of breaking his teacher's prohibition, he still carries out the task for the safety of his family.
7.	"Due to the King's request, Bomo Sakti could not refuse. 'I shall try, Your Majesty!'"	Responsibility	Bomo Sakti accepts the task despite it being heavy, because he knows his position as the King's servant. This is a form of social and professional responsibility.
8.	"Give my regards to my wife and children. Tell them, if they wish to meet me, tell them to come to Selempaya every Friday morning."	Responsibility	Despite leaving, Bomo Sakti does not abandon his family. He provides a way to stay connected. This shows emotional and moral responsibility as a husband and father.

9.	"He immediately returned to his boat [...] Bomo Sakti wept because he had violated his teacher's prohibition for the second time."	Responsibility	Bomo Sakti bears the consequences of his actions with honesty and sorrow. This is proof that he is responsible for his choices and mistakes.
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Discussion

Identified Character Values in Pelalawan Folktales

Based on the textual analysis of two Pelalawan folktales "The Golden Chain from the Riverbed" and "The Legend of Ketobong Keramat" a range of character values highly relevant to moral education in secondary schools has been identified. In "The Golden Chain from the Riverbed," greed serves as the central theme. Pak Nelayan, initially portrayed as a hardworking fisherman seeking only to provide for his family, succumbs to the temptation of accumulating more wealth (symbolized by the golden chain). This greed, however, leads to negative consequences: he loses his boat and returns home empty-handed. The narrative conveys a clear moral message emphasizing simplicity, diligence, self-restraint, and acceptance of one's limits.

Conversely, "The Legend of Ketobong Keramat" highlights values such as sincerity, humility, moral responsibility, and adherence to spiritual norms. Its protagonist, Bomo Sakti, is depicted as someone who consistently helps others without expecting anything in return. Even after being appointed the royal healer a position of prestige, he remains humble, continuing his daily routine of fishing in the Selempaya River. Nevertheless, his violation of his teacher's spiritual prohibition results in severe metaphysical consequences, thereby underscoring the importance of respecting moral and spiritual boundaries.

The analysis successfully identified key character values, including the contrast between greed and simplicity, as well as sincerity, humility, responsibility, and obedience to ethical-spiritual norms. Cultural symbols embedded in both narratives further enrich their moral dimensions. The golden chain in the first tale functions as a metaphor for materialistic temptation, while the ketobong (a sacred vessel) in the second symbolizes spiritual power that must be wielded with wisdom and reverence. These symbols reflect the local Pelalawan worldview, which emphasizes harmony among humans, nature, and the spiritual realm.

In "The Golden Chain from the Riverbed," greed not only illustrates the perils of materialism but also teaches the necessity of self-awareness and impulse control. When Pak Nelayan ignores the warning call of the Murai bird and continues pulling the chain, he demonstrates a failure of self-regulation. This act is met with natural retribution, his boat capsizes, and his endeavor ends in total failure. This narrative can be effectively utilized in educational settings to instill in students the value of gratitude, contentment, and critical reflection on the consequences of their choices. It reinforces the principle that every action, whether virtuous or harmful, entails consequences that must be weighed with discernment.

Meanwhile, "The Legend of Ketobong Keramat" offers profound lessons on sincerity and humility through Bomo Sakti's character. Despite his extraordinary abilities, he maintains a

simple lifestyle and helps others selflessly, a reflection of the communal ethic of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and social solidarity deeply rooted in Pelalawan's local wisdom. Yet the tale also stresses the gravity of moral and spiritual transgressions. When Bomo Sakti violates his teacher's prohibition, he suffers severe repercussions, including crop failure, inability to catch fish, and even infertility in livestock. These outcomes illustrate that ancestral norms are not arbitrary rules but sacred guidelines for ethical living that must be honored.

Both stories further emphasize the importance of moral responsibility in everyday life. In "The Golden Chain from the Riverbed," Pak Nelayan is held accountable for his decision to disregard the warning and pursue excessive gain. Similarly, in "The Legend of Ketobong Keramat," Bomo Sakti bears the consequences of choosing to break a spiritual taboo, even when motivated by familial concern. Collectively, these narratives teach that individuals must take responsibility, not only for their personal actions but also for their impact on others and the natural world.

The cultural symbols in both folktales provide deeper insight into the values cherished by the Pelalawan community. The golden chain represents the seductive allure of materialism, which can divert individuals from noble principles such as simplicity and hard work. The ketobong, by contrast, embodies spiritual potency; when Bomo Sakti discards it into the river, the resulting turbulent waves signify the profound interconnection between spiritual conduct and natural order. This reflects a local philosophical understanding of balance and interdependence among human beings, the environment, and the metaphysical realm.

Values such as simplicity, sincerity, humility, moral responsibility, and reverence for ethical-spiritual norms can be effectively internalized through these folktales. Consequently, Pelalawan folk narratives hold significant potential for integration into secondary-level language and literature curricula. By employing a contextualized pedagogical approach, educators can help students connect these enduring values to their daily lives while simultaneously preserving a culturally rich and morally resonant heritage (Kamal et al., 2025; Puspita et al., 2025; Sholeh et al., 2025).

Reconceptualising Character Education through Culturally Grounded Moral Narratives

The findings of this study critically interrogate dominant assumptions within global character education theory, particularly its tendency to universalise moral values while under-theorising the cultural mechanisms through which those values are learned and enacted. Prevailing frameworks often conceptualise character education as the internalisation of predefined virtues through habituation, moral reasoning, and behavioural reinforcement (Lickona, 1992; Muslich, 2022). While such approaches provide a normative ethical vocabulary, they risk reducing moral education to abstract moralism detached from learners' socio-cultural realities. The present study challenges this abstraction by demonstrating that character values embedded in Pelalawan folktales are not transmitted as static moral ideals, but as culturally situated moral logics enacted through narrative conflict, symbolic meaning, and consequence-driven storytelling. This suggests that moral formation is not value-neutral or universally

transferable, but deeply contingent upon cultural epistemologies that shape how morality is understood, justified, and lived (Lizawati & Uli, 2018; Rakhmi, 2020).

More specifically, the findings refine global character education theory by foregrounding moral contextuality as a central mechanism of character formation. Values such as responsibility, humility, sincerity, and self-restraint emerge in the folktales not as isolated virtues but as relational constructs linked to communal harmony, spiritual obedience, and ecological balance. For instance, in “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed,” greed is framed not merely as an individual moral flaw but as a violation of the ethical relationship between humans and nature, resulting in natural retribution. This narrative structure directly contests individualistic moral models that dominate global character education discourse, instead supporting a relational and communitarian understanding of ethics rooted in local cosmology (Lubis, 2017; Saidiman & Sumiyadi, 2018).

From a culturally responsive teaching (CRT) perspective, the findings extend CRT theory beyond its conventional emphasis on engagement, identity affirmation, and academic relevance. While CRT scholars argue that culturally aligned content enhances learning motivation and participation, this study demonstrates that CRT also operates as a moral epistemology, shaping how ethical meaning is constructed and internalised. The Pelalawan folktales function not merely as culturally familiar texts but as moral frameworks that legitimise local values within formal education. This challenges instructional paradigms that position local culture as peripheral or supplementary, reinforcing instead that culturally grounded narratives can function as authoritative moral texts within the curriculum (Sidabutar, 2024).

Crucially, the findings reveal that CRT becomes transformative only when cultural content is treated as a structuring principle of moral reasoning, not as a contextual backdrop. In “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat,” moral decision-making is inseparable from obedience to spiritual norms and ancestral authority. Such narratives require students to negotiate ethical complexity rather than merely identify moral messages. This extends CRT theory by demonstrating its capacity to foster ethical reflexivity and moral agency, not only cultural recognition. In this sense, the study moves CRT from an inclusive pedagogical strategy toward a critical moral pedagogy grounded in local wisdom (Kamal et al., 2025).

The findings also make a significant theoretical contribution to moral narrative theory, which posits that narratives shape moral understanding by enabling individuals to evaluate character intentions, choices, and consequences. Existing applications of moral narrative theory often privilege individual psychological processes such as empathy and perspective-taking. However, the present study expands this framework by demonstrating that local folktales operate as collective moral narratives, encoding communal norms, cosmological beliefs, and social sanctions. Moral violations in the narratives do not affect isolated individuals alone but disrupt social and natural order, reinforcing the idea that morality is collectively negotiated and culturally enforced (Rakhmi, 2020).

Furthermore, the study challenges simplistic interpretations of moral storytelling that equate narrative with moral clarity. The folktales analysed present moral ambiguity, delayed consequences, and symbolic punishment, compelling learners to engage in interpretative moral

reasoning rather than passive moral consumption. This finding extends moral narrative theory by highlighting that moral learning occurs not through explicit moral instruction, but through interpretative engagement with culturally embedded ethical dilemmas. Such narrative complexity supports deeper moral internalisation compared to didactic approaches that rely on overt moral messaging (Barli et al., 2024; Sugihartono, 2024).

In contrast to previous folklore-based educational studies that emphasise motivation, language acquisition, or cultural preservation, this study repositions folktales as ethically generative pedagogical texts. While earlier research tends to treat character values as thematic content to be identified, the present findings demonstrate that folktales actively structure moral cognition by linking action, intention, and consequence within culturally meaningful narrative systems. This moves the discourse beyond descriptive value identification toward a theoretically grounded understanding of how moral meaning is produced through narrative form (Erni & Ulya, 2021; Rakhmi, 2020).

Taken together, the findings suggest that character education grounded in local oral literature offers a substantive challenge to universalist and decontextualised moral education models. By integrating insights from global character education theory, culturally responsive teaching, and moral narrative theory, this study proposes a reconceptualisation of character education as a culturally mediated, narratively enacted, and relationally grounded process. Pelalawan folktales demonstrate that moral values are not merely taught, but experienced, negotiated, and internalised through culturally resonant storytelling. This positions local oral literature not at the margins of educational theory, but at its conceptual centre, offering a robust alternative framework for character education in culturally diverse and morally complex educational contexts.

This study makes three principal theoretical contributions to the field of character education. First, it challenges universalist models of global character education by demonstrating that moral values are not culturally neutral constructs but are epistemologically rooted in local worldviews, narrative traditions, and communal ethics. Character education is therefore reconceptualised as a culturally mediated process rather than a uniform moral transmission. Second, the study extends culturally responsive teaching theory by positioning local oral literature not merely as culturally relevant content, but as a moral epistemology that structures ethical reasoning, moral accountability, and value internalisation through narrative engagement. This shifts CRT from an inclusion-oriented pedagogy toward a transformative moral framework grounded in local wisdom. Third, the findings expand moral narrative theory by highlighting the collective and relational dimensions of moral storytelling, showing that folktales encode communal norms, spiritual authority, and ecological ethics through narrative causality and symbolic consequence. Collectively, these contributions advance an integrative theoretical model in which character education emerges through culturally grounded narratives that simultaneously cultivate moral reasoning, cultural identity, and ethical agency within formal education.

Relevance of Character Values to Language and Literature Instruction

The findings of this study demonstrate that Pelalawan folktales hold significant potential as educational media in Indonesian language and literature classrooms. First, these narratives can serve as effective vehicles for the contextual internalization of character values among students. For instance, “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” offers a profound lesson on the negative consequences of greed. In the story, Pak Nelayan, initially portrayed as a humble fisherman merely seeking to support his family, becomes tempted by the prospect of acquiring greater wealth in the form of a golden chain from the riverbed. His greed, however, leads to adverse outcomes: he loses his boat and returns home empty-handed. Teachers can leverage this narrative to design learning activities such as group discussions or reflective writing exercises that encourage students to connect the moral lessons of the tale to their own lived experiences. For example, students might explore how materialistic temptations influence human behavior and reflect on the virtues of simplicity, self-restraint, and diligence.

Table 3. Cultural Symbols and Their Moral Meanings

Cultural Symbol	Folktale	Symbolic Meaning	Represented Character Value
Golden chain	<i>The Golden Chain from the Riverbed</i>	Temptation of material wealth	Simplicity versus greed
River	<i>The Golden Chain from the Riverbed</i>	Nature as a moral balancer	Harmony between humans and nature
Ketobong	<i>The Tale of the Sacred Ketobong</i>	Spiritual power	Moral responsibility
River waves	<i>The Tale of the Sacred Ketobong</i>	Natural reaction to moral violation	Consequences of unethical actions

Similarly, “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat” can be employed to cultivate students’ understanding of sincerity, moral responsibility, and adherence to ethical and spiritual norms. The protagonist, Bomo Sakti, consistently helps others without expectation of reward; yet, he ultimately bears severe spiritual consequences for violating his teacher’s prohibition. This story not only conveys core ethical principles but also reinforces the idea that every action, whether virtuous or transgressive, carries consequences. Educators can apply a narrative-based pedagogical approach to unpack the story’s symbolic elements, such as the ketobong (a sacred vessel), which represents spiritual power. Through such analysis, students can grasp the deeper meaning embedded in the tale: that spiritual authority must be exercised with wisdom, humility, and in alignment with communal moral codes.

Integrating local cultural content into language and literature instruction aligns closely with the vision of Indonesia’s national education framework, which prioritizes character education as a foundational component of learning. Folktales like “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” and “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat” do more than preserve intangible cultural heritage, they also enable students to connect with their cultural roots. This approach resonates with the principles of contextual learning theory, which posits that learners better comprehend and retain knowledge when it is meaningfully linked to their personal experiences or cultural

backgrounds. For example, in “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed,” the relationship between humans and nature is illustrated through a sacred spring that offers opportunity but enforces consequences when its rules are disregarded. This reflects a local philosophical worldview centered on harmony between humanity and the natural environment, offering rich material for classroom dialogue.

The cultural symbols present in both narratives further deepen students’ appreciation of locally upheld values. In “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed,” the golden chain symbolizes the seductive nature of materialism, while in “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat,” the ketobong represents spiritual power that demands responsible stewardship. When Bomo Sakti discards the ketobong into the river, the resulting turbulent waves signify the profound interdependence between spiritual conduct, natural forces, and human well-being. This embodies a local cosmology that emphasizes balance among the human, natural, and spiritual realms. Educators can utilize these symbols to foster nuanced discussions that help students interpret and internalize cultural values beyond surface-level understanding.

Moreover, the theme of greed in “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” extends beyond a critique of materialism; it also underscores the importance of self-awareness and emotional regulation. When Pak Nelayan continues pulling the golden chain despite the Murai bird’s warning, he demonstrates an inability to control his desires. This lack of restraint triggers natural retribution, his boat is destroyed, and his effort ends in total failure. The narrative thus provides a compelling basis for teaching students to appreciate what they already possess and to resist the allure of excessive materialism. It also reinforces the ethical principle that all human actions entail consequences (positive or negative) that warrant thoughtful consideration.

Meanwhile, “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat” offers powerful lessons in sincerity and humility through Bomo Sakti’s character. Despite possessing extraordinary abilities, he maintains a simple lifestyle and helps others selflessly, a disposition that aligns closely with the ethical ideals promoted in character education. His altruism reflects the values of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and social solidarity, which are integral to Pelalawan’s local wisdom. Yet the story also cautions against disregarding moral and spiritual boundaries. When Bomo Sakti violates his teacher’s prohibition, he suffers severe repercussions, including crop failure, the inability to catch fish, and even infertility in livestock. This illustrates that ancestral norms are not arbitrary customs but ethical guidelines essential to communal and individual well-being (Erni & Andriyani, 2022; Erni & Ulya, 2021; Setiarti & Erni, 2023).

Collectively, these folktales affirm that oral literature functions not merely as entertainment but as a didactic medium rich in moral and cultural meaning. Values such as simplicity, sincerity, humility, responsibility, and respect for moral-spiritual norms can be effectively internalized through engagement with these stories. Consequently, Pelalawan folktales possess substantial potential for integration into secondary-level language and literature curricula. Such integration not only supports character development but also enhances student motivation, as folk narratives are typically conveyed through compelling, accessible, and culturally resonant storytelling forms (Ferando et al., 2025; Nuryanto et al., 2025; Sugihartono, 2024).

Strategies for Integrating Folktales into Indonesian Language Instruction at the Senior Secondary Level

The findings of this study have significant implications for the development of language and literature pedagogical models grounded in local wisdom. A learning model that integrates folktales, such as “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” and “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat” offers an innovative approach to strengthening character education in secondary schools. For example, the theme of greed illustrated in “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” can be employed to teach students the virtues of simplicity and diligence. Likewise, the values of sincerity and moral responsibility embedded in “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat” can help learners reflect on the real-life consequences of their actions. While this model is rooted in the cultural context of Pelalawan, it is readily adaptable to other regions across Indonesia that possess similarly rich oral traditions. Thus, it serves as both an effective tool for preserving local heritage and a means of fostering ethical development among students.

Table 4. Relevance of Character Values to Indonesian Language Learning at Senior High School Level

Character Value	Learning Competency	Form of Classroom Implementation
Simplicity	Analysing literary characters	Group discussion on character and conflict
Sincerity	Literary appreciation	Moral reflection activities
Humility	Reflective writing	Writing personal reflective essays
Responsibility	Social value discussion	Case studies based on folktales
Obedience to norms	Cultural literacy	Analysis of symbols and cultural messages

Furthermore, the development of standardized evaluation instruments is essential to assess the effectiveness of integrating character values through folktales in classroom instruction. Such instruments may include a combination of written assessments to measure students’ comprehension of moral values and behavioral observations to evaluate their real-world application. For instance, in the context of “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed,” teachers might observe whether students demonstrate resistance to materialistic temptations. In the case of “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat,” assessment could focus on how students embody sincerity and adherence to moral norms in their social interactions. This multifaceted evaluation approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which character values are internalized by learners.

This pedagogical approach makes a tangible contribution to the field of education, particularly in advancing character development through culturally grounded strategies. Folktales like “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” and “The Legend of Ketobong Keramat” function not only as educational media but also as bridges connecting the past and the future. Through these narratives, students gain insight into the noble values upheld by their ancestors, such as honesty, hard work, mutual cooperation (gotong royong), and tolerance thereby

aligning with the national education vision that positions character education as an integral component of learning. By using folktales as instructional tools, moral values are taught not as abstract ideals but as actionable principles that students can meaningfully apply in daily life, rendering learning both relevant and transformative.

The findings affirm that oral literature, particularly folktales, holds considerable potential as a powerful instrument for shaping a generation of young people who are ethically grounded, critically reflective, and creatively engaged. By embedding character values from folktales into language and literature curricula, students move beyond theoretical knowledge of language and literature toward an ethical understanding that resonates with their personal and social realities (Hatima, 2025; Ulviani, 2025). This approach cultivates students' sensitivity to their socio-cultural environment and helps prepare them to become future leaders of integrity. In this sense, the study offers a significant contribution to educational practice and serves as a foundational step toward a more culturally responsive and locally rooted transformation of education.

The integration of folktales such as "The Golden Chain from the Riverbed" and "The Legend of Ketobong Keramat" into senior secondary Indonesian language instruction can be strategically implemented through character analysis of narrative figures. Teachers can design text-based learning activities in which students identify character values reflected in characters' actions. For example, in "The Golden Chain from the Riverbed," students might analyze Pak Nelayan, initially portrayed as diligent and humble but later overcome by greed. Through group discussions or reflective essays, learners can explore how greed influences an individual's life trajectory. Such activities not only enhance students' narrative comprehension but also facilitate meaningful connections between moral lessons and contemporary contexts.

A literary appreciation approach can further enrich classroom engagement with character values. In "The Legend of Ketobong Keramat," for instance, students can be guided to appreciate Bomo Sakti's humility and selfless service. Teachers may direct learners to examine the protagonist's dialogue and actions and their impact on narrative development. This method allows students to simultaneously master literary elements, such as setting, plot, and characterization and recognize how moral values are conveyed through language and narrative style. Consequently, students develop both literacy competencies and a deeper ethical awareness applicable to everyday life.

Collaborative and active learning methodologies can also be strategically employed (Indriyani et al., 2025; Ulya et al., 2025). One effective strategy involves having students adapt folktales into dramatic performances or monologues. For example, learners might stage a scene in which Bomo Sakti faces the moral dilemma of whether to violate his teacher's prohibition to heal the princess. Such dramatization not only sharpens students' speaking and writing skills but also deepens their understanding of the ethical weight of decision-making. Teachers can facilitate follow-up discussions on how the choices portrayed in the narrative parallel real-life moral challenges, thereby promoting profound internalization of character values.

Digital technology offers an additional strategic avenue to enhance folktale-based instruction (Baiti & Putera, 2025; Huda et al., 2025). Educators can leverage digital media, such

as animated videos, podcasts, or interactive e-learning platforms to deliver folktales in engaging formats. For instance, “The Golden Chain from the Riverbed” could be adapted into a short animated video that vividly illustrates the allure of materialism and its consequences. Students might then be tasked with composing critical responses or moral reflections on the story’s message. By blending technology with oral literary traditions, teachers can create dynamic, youth-relevant learning environments that ensure the continued vitality and relevance of traditional character values in modern education (Achmad et al., 2025; Baiti & Putera, 2025; Saputra, 2025). This approach also empowers students to express moral insights creatively through media aligned with their interests and digital literacy.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Pelalawan folktales, particularly *“The Golden Chain from the Riverbed”* and *“The Legend of Ketobong Keramat”*, function as culturally grounded pedagogical media capable of strengthening character education in secondary-level Indonesian language and literature instruction. Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of character education in three important ways. First, it challenges universalist character education models by demonstrating that moral values are not culturally neutral but are epistemologically rooted in local worldviews, narrative traditions, and communal ethics. Second, it extends culturally responsive teaching theory by positioning local oral literature not merely as culturally relevant content, but as a moral epistemology that structures ethical reasoning, moral accountability, and value internalisation through narrative consequence and symbolic meaning. Third, it expands moral narrative theory by highlighting the collective, relational, and cosmological dimensions of moral storytelling, showing that folktales encode ethical norms through culturally situated narrative causality rather than explicit moral instruction alone. Despite these contributions, this study is limited by its qualitative scope and reliance on textual analysis of only two folktales, without empirical classroom implementation or longitudinal observation of students’ character development. As a result, the findings cannot yet be generalised across diverse educational contexts or used to measure behavioural change quantitatively. Future research is therefore recommended to employ classroom-based experimental or mixed-method designs, develop validated instruments for assessing character internalisation, and examine the implementation of folktale-based character education across different regions, educational levels, and cultural settings. Such research would strengthen the empirical foundation of this approach and further advance a culturally responsive, narratively grounded model of character education rooted in local wisdom.

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