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Local legends of North Sumatra in a comparative literature perspective: Themes, motifs, and character education

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Abstract: *These North Sumatran legends preserve cultural memory and represent community understandings of family relations, identity, responsibility, and the consequences of human actions. This study compares Sampuraga, Pulau Simardan, Sikantan, and Lau Kawar through comparative literature, particularly comparative thematology, and considers their implications for literature-based character education in schools. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive method involving close reading, data recording, identification of themes and motifs, comparison of conflict structures, and symbolic interpretation of geographical settings. The analysis identifies shared concerns with family rupture, identity, recognition, responsibility, catastrophe, and the cultural meanings attached to place. However, the thematic transformations differ: Sampuraga, Pulau Simardan, and Sikantan foreground the rejection of a mother following upward social mobility, whereas Lau Kawar depicts the neglect and exclusion of a family member within a communal setting. These findings inform a five-stage conceptual learning sequence: identifying, comparing, interpreting, recontextualizing, and reflecting and creating. The proposed sequence treats legends as literary works and resources for cultural literacy and character education. It remains a conceptual proposal and has not yet been tested in an actual classroom.*

Keywords: *local legends, comparative literature, thematology, motifs, character education*

INTRODUCTION

Oral literature serves as a vehicle for transmitting cultural heritage, keeping alive a community's shared beliefs, values, norms, and collective memories. Its narratives function not only to entertain but also to help communities comprehend their experiences and pass down knowledge across generations. This synthesis of aesthetic appeal and utility aligns with the classical principle of dulce et utile (sweet and useful). Oral narratives are passed down through iterative storytelling, allowing their modes of delivery to dynamically adapt based on the narrator, the audience, and the contextual situation. Consequently, legends should not be viewed merely as ancient tales, but rather as cultural texts that continuously acquire new layers of meaning as they are transmitted and reread across time (Rahman, 2022; Tondang & Sembiring, 2024).

This context is essential for understanding the legends of North Sumatra. This region boasts a wealth of oral tradition inherited from diverse cultural groups, such as the Karo, Mandailing, and coastal communities. The legends of *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, *Sikantan*, and *Lau Kawar* all address core issues surrounding familial relations, identity, social mobility, personal responsibility, and existential crises, intertwining these themes with specific geographical

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landscapes. The three narratives of *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, and *Sikantan* exhibit a distinct structural pattern: a child from an impoverished background leaves home, achieves social and financial success, reunites with his mother, but ultimately refuses to acknowledge or accept the maternal relationship. This conflict culminates in a catastrophic event, giving rise to a geographic location memorialized through legend. Conversely, *Lau Kawar* presents a unique contextual variation: an elderly family member is neglected and ostracized during a communal celebration, leading to an adverse outcome inextricably linked to the origin of Lake Lau Kawar.

This comparative analysis is significant because migration or upward social mobility is not presented as an inherently immoral act. In *Sampuraga*, the protagonist initially embarks on a journey to seek a better livelihood and bring happiness to his mother; the central conflict arises only when social mobility alters his social identity. Similarly, *Sikantan* leaves home to improve his life, yet subsequently refuses to recognize his mother upon his return. *Pulau Simardan* illustrates the attempt to conceal and reconstruct one's life narrative following material success. Meanwhile, *Lau Kawar* broadens this thematic understanding by demonstrating that relational ruptures can stem from passive neglect rather than explicit rejection alone (Syarfina & Anggraini, 2024).

Previous scholarly works have examined these four narratives from various perspectives, analyzing their narrative techniques, social functions, underlying socio-cultural meanings, character values, and structural compositions. Comparative studies have also explored *Sampuraga*, *Sikantan*, and other Indonesian folklores. Thus, this study does not claim to be the first to compare these legends. Rather, the research gap addressed here lies in examining thematic and motif transformations, alongside their implications for character education through comparative literary readings.

Comparative thematology proves particularly effective because a theme can be analyzed simultaneously as a subject matter, a narrative plot, and an abstract concept. This study focuses specifically on parent-child dynamics. Narrative-wise, the plots revolve around processes of rejection, denial, and neglect. Conceptually, it engages with topics such as migrant (wandering/migration), shifts in social status, maternal reunions, maternal rejection, and cataclysmic disasters. The concept of "filial relational rupture" serves as a analytical framework to understand how shifts in social identity can lead to growing alienation from one's familial origins, ultimately resulting in the denial or abandonment of kinship ties. Another pivotal concept is the "morally charged landscape," which demonstrates how physical locations acquire moral significance through narratives of conflict and calamity, preserving these spaces within collective cultural memory (Dorsey, 1990; Nurgiyantoro, 2015).

This study aims to: (1). Identify how the theme of filial relational rupture is manifested across four legends from North Sumatra; (2). Examine the structural similarities in narrative motifs, ranging from migrant , upward social mobility, maternal reunion, maternal rejection, to cataclysmic disaster; (3). Explore the trajectory from familial conflict to morally charged landscapes; and (4). Formulate a methodology for leveraging comparative literature to teach character education in school settings. The novelty of this study lies in examining these four narratives collectively as a comparative group, prioritizing thematic transformation over simple structural alignment. Furthermore, the empirical findings of this literary analysis are translated into a pedagogical framework designed to foster deep learning without reducing literary analysis to superficial moralizing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparative Literature and Comparative Thematology

Comparative literature facilitates a broader understanding of how diverse works, themes, forms, and ideas interconnect across texts and cultures. Rather than being restricted to national literatures, comparative literature can also investigate traditions stemming from shared geographical or cultural regions, especially when such comparisons elucidate the ways in which

texts, themes, concepts, and contextual backgrounds intersect. The four North Sumatran legends are geographically linked yet originate from distinct cultural backgrounds and storytelling traditions, making a comparative analysis highly suitable for examining their structural similarities and contextual differences (Bassnett, 1993; Damrosch, 2003).

Comparative thematology is employed to ensure that the comparison goes beyond merely listing similarities and differences. Themes can be conceptualized in three distinct ways: what the story is about, how the story is told, and the primary idea or message it conveys. Thus, "filial relational rupture" is distinct from specific plot points such as migrating, the mother's return, praying, cursing, or catastrophic events. While a motif refers to a recurring element within a narrative, a theme represents the essential relational dynamic between these elements. This conceptual distinction enables the analysis to move beyond simplistic statements like "the child was disobedient" to examine the underlying processes that cause the rupture between parents and children (Dorsey, 1990).

Legend as Oral Literature and Cultural Text

Legends are narratives transmitted across generations, deeply embedded in memory, place, community, and performance. As such, they cannot be analyzed as fixed, singular texts authored by a single individual. Oral traditions take shape through performance and transmission, with written transcriptions representing specific manifestations of a much broader tradition. Discrepancies between narrative versions should not be automatically categorized as textual errors. In this study, the four legends are examined as written records of oral narratives, with contextual details from primary sources verified prior to final synthesis (Lord, 1960; Finnegan, 1992; Dundes, 1980).

Theory of Themes and Motifs in Legends

In comparative literary studies, themes and motifs constitute two distinct analytical domains. The study of theme focuses on the underlying idea of a narrative, serving as the foundational baseline in developing a fictional work (Aminuddin, 2011:91). Conversely, motif theory is applied to examine recurring narrative patterns across legends. A motif in folklore refers to a salient and unusual element within a story (Hasan, 2017: 140). Aligning with this view, a motif represents a traditional, recurring, and universal narrative core (Kasim, 1996:60). In legends, motifs correspond to recurring narrative units, encompassing character types, situational settings, actions, or events that drive the plot forward.

In this research, thematic theory is utilized to uncover shared themes across *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, and *Sikantan*, where filial relational rupture acts as the primary theme. From a motif perspective, all three legends present a uniform sequence of events: poverty prompting migration to alter one's fate; upward social mobility resulting from marriage into nobility or wealthy merchant families; a reunion with the mother after prolonged separation; the child's explicit denial of kinship; and the occurrence of a final catastrophe.

This sequential pattern can be analyzed as a motif cluster contributing to the thematic construct of filial relational rupture, offering a viable medium for character education. Differentiating between theme and motif is critical in comparative literary research. Furthermore, this theoretical framework allows the legend of *Lau Kawar* to be integrated into the framework of filial relational rupture, albeit manifested through passive neglect and exclusion within a family dynamic.

Character Education Through Literary Works

Character education extends beyond extracting superficial moral lessons from books. It requires pedagogical frameworks that assist students in internalizing virtues and constructive behaviors through dialogue, observation of role models, discussions, critical reflections, and

group participation. Folklore can foster character development by conveying essential values. Contemporary research indicates that folklore can be integrated into instruction through multifaceted approaches, including reading, guided discussions, role-playing, reflective writing, critical contemplation, and portfolio assessments. This study incorporates a comparative dimension: rather than deriving a single value from a solitary text, students analyze multiple narratives to explore how similar human dilemmas are represented across different contexts (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Kusmana & Nurzaman, 2021; Kurniawati et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in comparative literature and comparative thematology. The primary dataset comprises four legends from North Sumatra: *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, *Sikantan*, and *Lau Kawar*, retrieved from the textual anthologies used in this study. Because legends originate from oral traditions, the analyzed texts are treated as written transcriptions rather than canonical, definitive versions (Bassnett, 1993; Dorsey, 1990).

The textual data encompasses narrative units depicting character origins, migration journeys, shifts in social status, family relationships, acts of recognition or neglect, dialogues, prayers, curses, catastrophic events, symbolic elements, and spatial settings. Data collection was conducted through close reading and systematic recording.

The analysis proceeded through four distinct steps: (1). Identifying core ideas and recurring motifs within each narrative; (2). Synthesizing corresponding narrative segments; (3). Comparing shared structural features and points of divergence; and (4). Interpreting how similar themes evolve within adjacent or shared cultural contexts. This analysis does not aim to evaluate textual authenticity or superiority; rather, it demonstrates how themes transform and how distinct cultures articulate these stories in unique ways.

Interpretive credibility was bolstered by triangulating theoretical frameworks and grounding findings in prior literature. Structural findings and narrative patterns were analyzed collectively across all four legends, while pedagogical proposals were informed by existing studies on folklore-based literary instruction (Patton, 1990). The final stage involved pedagogical translation. The instructional model proposed herein is conceptual, tailored for secondary school literature education. This model has not yet been implemented in active classroom settings or evaluated via empirical educational research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

A comparative analysis of *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, and *Sikantan* reveals significant thematic convergence, specifically regarding filial relational rupture developed through identical narrative motifs. All three legends depict a sequence starting with migrant , shifts in social status, emerging familial conflicts, and culminating in the deliberate rejection of one's origin and family.

This escalation of conflict leads to a major catastrophe as a direct consequence of the protagonist's actions. In contrast, *Lau Kawar* presents filial relational rupture through the motif of neglect and social exclusion of an elderly family member in distress. This attitude not only degrades interpersonal family dynamics but also triggers a disastrous event that brings ruin upon the entire community. Thus, while all four legends share a thematic foundation of filial relational rupture, they diverge in conflict structures, forms of rejection, and ultimate consequences.

Table 1. Key Comparative Findings

Dimension	*Sampuraga*	*Pulau Simardan*	*Sikantan*	*Lau Kawar*
Migration	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant	Dominant
Status Shift	Strong	Strong	Strong	Non-dominant
Family Conflict	Rejection	Rejection	Rejection	Neglect/Exclusion
Identity Crisis	Strong	Strong	Strong	Not explicit
Social Shame	Strong	Strong	Strong	Non-dominant
Prayer/Curse	Prayer/Curse	Prayer/Curse	Prayer/Curse	Prayer/Curse
Catastrophe	Hot spring pool	Island	Island	Lake
Spatial Memory	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Primary Configuration	Filial relational rupture	Filial relational rupture	Filial relational rupture	Filial relational rupture (Neglect/Exclusion)

Table 1 demonstrates that similarities acquire deeper meaning through points of divergence. Themes do not exist as rigid formulas; rather, they are dynamically altered by narrative structure and cultural context (Genette, 1997).

Thematic Transformations in Sampuraga, Pulau Simardan, Sikantan, and Lau Kawar

The underlying theme linking *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, *Sikantan*, and *Lau Kawar* is filial relational rupture. Although all narratives focus on family breakdown, *Lau Kawar* manifests this process through a distinct narrative path, whereas *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, and *Sikantan* share a common structural trajectory. In the latter three legends, the rupture occurs explicitly when the protagonist denies his mother, disowns her identity, and casts her out.

> *Sampuraga*
>
> *"Hei, perempuan jelek! Enak saja kamu mengaku-ngaku sebagai ibuku. Aku tidak punya ibu jelek seperti kamu! Pergi dari sini! Jangan mengacaukan acaraku!", hardik Sampuraga* (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 70).
>
> ["Hey, you ugly woman! How dare you claim to be my mother. I don't have an ugly mother like you! Get out of here! Don't ruin my event!" scolded Sampuraga.]
>
> *"Tidak! Kau bukan ibuku! Ibuku sudah lama meninggal dunia. Algojo! Usir nenek tua ini!" Perintah Sampuraga. Hati Sampuraga benar-benar sudah tertutup. Ia tega sekali mengingkari dan mengusir ibu kandungnya sendiri"* (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 70).
>
> ["No! You are not my mother! My mother passed away a long time ago. Executioner! Drive this old woman away!" commanded Sampuraga.

Sampuraga's heart was truly hardened. He had the heart to disown and drive away his own birth mother.]

Simardan

Tanpa diduga Simardan malah menepis pelukannya dan mendorong ibunya hingga tersungkur. Walaupun istrinya meminta Simardan untuk mengakui bahwa wanita tua itu ibunya namun pendiriannya tetap tidak berubah. Selain itu, Simardan juga mengusir ibunya dan mengatakannya sebagai pengemis (Baiduri, et. al ., 2020, p. 58, 59).

[Without warning, Simardan brushed off her embrace and pushed his mother to the ground. Even though his wife pleaded with him to acknowledge that the old woman was his mother, he refused to change his stance. Furthermore, Simardan drove his mother away, calling her a beggar.]

Sikantan

*"Tidak! dia tetap bukan ibuku. Hei wanita tua renta, jangan pernah kau mengaku-ngaku sebagai ibuku. Aku tidak punya ibu yang miskin dan penyakitan seperti engkau," jawab Sikantan lantang dan dengan nada tinggi (*Kemendikbud, 2016, p. 71).

["No! She is still not my mother. Hey, you frail old woman, don't you dare claim to be my mother. I don't have a poor, sickly mother like you," Sikantan answered loudly in a high-pitched tone.]

As illustrated by these excerpts, *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, and *Sikantan* center on the rupture between mother and son. This rupture manifests when the son reunites with his mother after experiencing upward social mobility abroad, having transformed into a wealthy and influential figure. Conversely, the mother is portrayed as an impoverished, frail woman whose socioeconomic condition sharply contrasts with her son's current standing. This disparity induces social shame in the son, driving him to disown his mother. This explicit rejection triggers the total breakdown of filial bonds. Lau Kawar, while sharing the overarching theme of familial rupture, presents distinct underlying causes and conflict dynamics.

Lau Kawar as a Cultural Variation

Lau Kawar should not be conflated structurally with the other three legends. The central conflict in *Lau Kawar* revolves around an elderly grandmother who is neglected during a major communal celebration.

Ia sangat kecewa, tak terasa air matanya keluar dari kedua kelopak matanya. Ibu tua itu menangisi nasibnya yang malang. "Ya, Tuhan! Anak-cucuku benar-benar tega membiarkan aku menderita begini. Di sana mereka makan enak-enak sampai kenyang, sedang aku dibiarkan kelaparan (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 50).

["She was deeply disappointed, and tears unconsciously trickled down from her eyes. The old mother wept over her miserable fate. 'Oh God! My own child and

grandchild truly have the heart to let me suffer like this. Over there, they eat delicious food until they are full, while I am left to starve."]

She is left behind, given only leftover food, prompting her to pray that her family and community realize the harm caused by their negligence.

> *"Ya, Tuhan!" Mereka telah berbuat durhaka kepadaku. Berilah mereka pelajaran!" perempuan tua itu memohon kepada Tuhan Yang Mahakuasa. Baru saja kalimat itu lepas dari mulut si nenek tua, tiba-tiba terjadi gempa bumi yang sangat dahsyat* (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 51).
>
> ["Oh God! They have been disobedient to me. Teach them a lesson!" the old woman prayed to Almighty God. No sooner had those words left the old woman's mouth than a massive earthquake suddenly struck.]

This variation is theoretically significant. Filial relational rupture does not always stem from explicit verbal rejection; it can also result from apathy, neglect, emotional detachment, and unfulfilled relational responsibilities. The broader comparative concept extends beyond wealthy sons turning away from their mothers to encompass the collapse of foundational familial and social bonds.

Motif Transformations in Sampuraga, Pulau Simardan, and Sikantan

Migration (Migrant)

Sampuraga, *Pulau Simardan*, and *Sikantan* clearly demonstrate how spatial migration is intertwined with identity transformation. Initially, mobility is linked to filial duty: the protagonist leaves home to seek better economic opportunities and improve his mother's well-being.

> *Sampuraga.*
> *"Bu, Raga ingin pergi merantau untuk mencari pekerjaan yang lebih baik. Raga ingin mengubah nasib kita yang sudah lama menderita ini," kata Sampuraga kepada ibunya* (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 67).
> ["Mother, I want to go abroad to find a better job. I want to change our fate after suffering for so long," Sampuraga said to his mother.]
>
> *Simardan.*
>
> *Simardan adalah anak dari wanita miskin dan yatim. Pada suatu hari, dia pergi merantau ke negeri seberang, untuk mencari nafkah* (Baiduri, et al., p. 58).
>
> [Simardan was an orphan and the child of a poor woman. One day, he went abroad to a foreign land to earn a living.]
>
> *Sikantan:*
> *Singkat cerita, orang tua Sikantan pun mengantarkan kepergian putra mereka ke pinggiran sungai. Dengan menggunakan perahu kecil Sikantan mulai mengayuh perahunya untuk menuju negeri Malaka* (Kemendikbud, 2016, p. 64, 65).
>
> [Long story short, Sikantan's parents saw their son off at the riverbank. Using a small boat, Sikantan began to row his boat toward the land of Malacca.]

Shift in Social Status

All three legends depict a drastic rise in social status from severe poverty to immense wealth.

> *Sampuraga:*
> *Dalam waktu singkat, usaha dagang Sampuraga berkembang dengan pesat. Keuntungan yang diperolehnya ia tabung untuk menambah modalnya, sehingga usahanya semakin lama semakin maju. Tak lama kemudian, ia pun terkenal sebagai pengusaha muda yang kaya-raya* (Baiduri, et al.,2020, p. 68).
> [In a short time, Sampuraga's trading business grew rapidly. He saved the profits he earned to increase his capital, so that his business kept advancing over time. Soon after, he became famous as a wealthy young entrepreneur.]
>
> *Simardan:*
> *Pada saat itu juga Simardan bertemu dengan putri kerajaan tersebut yang cantik jelita. Akhirnya Simardan dan putri tersebut pun menikah. Pada suatu hari mereka memutuskan untuk kembali ke kota Tanjung Balai untuk berdagang dan mencari bahan kebutuhan. Menurut warga sekitar nama pemilik kapal tersebut adalah Simardan* (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 58).
> [Right at that moment, Simardan met the king's daughter, who was exceedingly beautiful. Eventually, Simardan and the princess got married. One day, they decided to return to the city of Tanjung Balai to trade and look for essential supplies. According to the local residents, the owner of the ship was Simardan.]
>
> *Sikantan:*
> *Akhirnya, singkat waktu saudagar tersebut mengangkat Sikantan menjadi menantunya sekaligus memberi kepercayaan kepada Sikantan untuk meneruskan usahanya* (Kemendikbud, 2016, p. 66).
>
> [In short, the merchant eventually took Sikantan as his son-in-law while also entrusting him to run his business].

Reunion with the Mother

> *Sampuraga:*
> *Ia sangat malu kepada para undangan yang hadir, karena nenek tua itu tiba-tiba mengakuinya sebagai anak. "Hei, perempuan jelek! Enak saja kamu mengaku-ngaku sebagai ibuku* (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 70).
> [He felt deeply ashamed before the guests in attendance because the old woman suddenly claimed him as her son. "Hey, you ugly woman! How dare you claim to be my mother."]
>
> *Simardan:*
> *Ibu Simardan pun segera memeluk anaknya tersebut dan mengatakan bahwa Simardan merupakan anak kandungnya yang telah lama tidak pulang* (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 58).
> [Simardan's mother immediately hugged her son and said that Simardan was her biological child who had not returned home for a long time.]
>
> *Sikantan:*

Sikantan hanya diam dan memperhatikannya, si pemuda pun kembali berteriak, "Ini ibumu Kantan. Dia ingin berjumpa denganmu. Sikantan kembali hanya terdiam dan memperhatikan mereka (Kemendikbud, 2016, p. 69).
[Sikantan remained silent and watched her, so the young man shouted once again, "This is your mother, Kantan. She wants to meet you." Sikantan again just stayed silent and watched them.]

Maternal Rejection

The motif of rejecting the mother upon reunion occurs across all three legends, displaying structural symmetry driven by the stark contrast between the mother's poverty and the son's newly acquired wealth and status.

Sampuraga:
"Tidak! Kau bukan ibuku! Ibuku sudah lama meninggal dunia. Algojo! Usir nenek tua ini!" Perintah Sampuraga (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 70).
["No! You are not my mother! My mother passed away a long time ago. Executioner! Drive this old woman away!" commanded Sampuraga.]

Simardan:
"Tanpa diduga Simardan malah menepis pelukannya dan mendorong ibunya hingga tersungkur. Selain itu, Simardan juga mengusir ibunya dan mengatakannya sebagai pengemis" (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 58, 59).
[Unexpectedly, Simardan brushed off her embrace and pushed his mother until she collapsed to the ground. Furthermore, Simardan drove his mother away and called her a beggar.]

Sikantan:
Berkata Sikantan dengan nada lantang, "Tidak! Dia bukan ibuku, aku seorang saudagar kaya raya mana mungkin punya ibu yang miskin dan renta seperti dia, ibuku sudah mati." (Kemendikbud, 2016, p. 70).
[Sikantan said in a loud tone, "No! She is not my mother. I am a wealthy merchant, how could I possibly have a poor and frail mother like her? My mother is dead."]

Catastrophe

Sampuraga:
Seketika itu juga, tiba-tiba langit diselimuti awan tebal dan hitam. Petir menyambar bersahut-sahutan. Tak lama kemudian, hujan deras pun turun diikuti suara guntur yang menggelegar seakan memecah gendang telinga. Dalam waktu singkat, tempat penyelenggaraan pesta itu tenggelam seketika. Tak seorang pun penduduk yang selamat, termasuk Sampuraga dan istrinya(Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 70).
[At that very moment, the sky was suddenly covered with thick, dark clouds. Lightning struck continuously. Shortly after, heavy rain poured down, accompanied by deafening thunder that seemed to split one's eardrums. In a short time, the party venue was instantly submerged. Not a single resident survived, including Sampuraga and his wife.]

Simardan:
Setelah berdoa kemudian turunlah hujan petir dan gemuruh disertai ombak laut yang kencang mengarah ke arah kapal Simardan hingga kapal tersebut hancur dan berantakan. Simardan tenggelam ke dalam lautan dan menjadi sebuah pulau. Istri dan para pelayan Simardan berubah menjadi kera putih yang akhirnya hidup di pulau tersebut (Baiduri, et al., 2020, p. 59).
[After she prayed, a rainstorm with lightning and thunder broke out, accompanied by strong ocean waves surging toward Simardan's ship until it was destroyed and shattered into pieces. Simardan sank into the sea and was transformed into an island. Simardan's wife and servants were turned into white monkeys that eventually inhabited the island.]

Sikantan:
Langit menjadi gelap dan kilat sambar-menyambar. Ombak mulai kencang menghadang kapal Sikantan. Seketika itu pula kapal Sikantan karam tenggelam ditelan laut (Kemendikbud, 2016, p. 72).
[The sky turned dark and lightning struck repeatedly. Waves began surging against Sikantan's ship. At that very instant, Sikantan's ship capsized and sank, swallowed by the sea.]

Character Education Through Comparative Literature Reading

The findings of this study have notable implications for literature-based instruction. When students read only a single legend, their learning is often limited to extracting a direct moral lesson. Conversely, analyzing multiple legends concurrently demonstrates how moral dilemmas and interpersonal conflicts manifest in varied ways.

Sampuraga can be linked to feelings of shame and the concealment of one's background. *Pulau Simardan* relates to the falsification of identity. *Sikantan* highlights filial rejection driven by social power dynamics. *Lau Kawar* emphasizes the consequences of neglecting vulnerable family members. Under this comparative model, character education becomes an active interpretive process rather than passive moralizing. Students critically analyze human actions, underlying motivations, consequences, diverse perspectives, and relational dynamics (Berkowitz, 2011).

This literature-based character education model can be implemented through a five-stage instructional sequence: (1) Textual Identification: Students read all four legends using verified textual sources. Teachers guide students in identifying intrinsic elements, including characters, characterization, plot, setting, conflict, and theme, ensuring that character interpretations are grounded in textual evidence; (2) Comparative Group Analysis: Students work collaboratively to compare the four narratives. Groups construct comparative matrices mapping moral dilemmas, character decisions, consequences, core values, and alternative conflict resolutions. Groups present their analyses and engage in peer discussions; (3) Ethical Dilemma Discussions: Students participate in guided moral discussions. Teachers pose open-ended questions, such as: How can one pursue personal ambitions without neglecting familial responsibilities? How should interpersonal family conflicts be addressed? Why is perspective-taking essential in decision-making? These questions encourage reasoning, active listening, and consideration of moral consequences; (4) Role-Playing and Alternative Scenario Writing: Students engage in role-playing or rewrite narrative resolutions. This activity allows them to explore responsible conflict resolution strategies, such as constructive dialogue, apology, honesty, or empathy, evaluating how altered character choices reshape narrative outcomes; (5) Written Reflection and Assessment: Students complete written reflections in Student Worksheets. The worksheets capture reading logs, comparative tables, discussion summaries, role-play scripts, and personal value reflections.

Assessment evaluates textual evidence usage, argumentative rigor, empathy toward diverse viewpoints, and depth of self-reflection.

This instructional model aligns with character education principles that position social interaction, modeling, and skill development at the core of the learning experience (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Berkowitz, 2011). However, instructional efficacy requires ongoing evaluation. Teachers should monitor student engagement, assess the evolution of moral reasoning, and review collaborative behaviors over time. Comparative reading prompts deeper inquiries into forms of rejection, identity concealment, public shame, passive neglect, and personal accountability, demonstrating that character education is intrinsically connected to narrative structure and cultural context.

From Family Conflict to Morally Charged Landscapes

The research reveals a narrative trajectory transitioning from interpersonal conflict to spatial memorialization: human conflict triggers a natural catastrophe, which alters the physical landscape; geographic names are subsequently assigned to these sites, embedding them into collective cultural memory. The hot spring pool of Sampuraga, the islands of Simardan and Sikantan, and Lake Lau Kawar function not merely as static backgrounds, but as physical reminders of the narratives' ethical lessons.

The concept of a "morally charged landscape" accounts for this spatial transition without attributing intrinsic morality to natural topography. Communities project cultural meaning onto physical spaces through oral storytelling. Thus, legends evolve from personal human experiences into structured narratives, and ultimately into spatial memories tied to specific locations. Physical geography becomes an active component of the framework that preserves cultural memory over time.

Limitations of the Study

Because these narratives originate from oral traditions, the texts analyzed herein represent specific transcriptions rather than absolute, singular versions. Prior to final archival or publication, primary source variants should be systematically cataloged and cross-checked across storytellers, publishers, archives, and cultural institutions. Furthermore, this study did not empirically evaluate audience reception or conduct classroom-based action research; as such, the proposed pedagogical framework remains conceptual. Finally, the scope is limited to four legends from North Sumatra and does not claim to represent the entire corpus of Indonesian folklore.

CONCLUSION

These four North Sumatran legends can be integrated into broader comparative literary studies while preserving their distinct cultural nuances. Their shared thematic core centers on family dynamics, identity recognition, social responsibility, self-awareness, and moral consequences, rather than identical plot structures. *Sampuraga*, *Pulau Simardan*, and *Sikantan* display strong motif alignments, following a structured sequence of migrant, upward social mobility, maternal reunion, maternal rejection, and ultimate catastrophe. In contrast, *Lau Kawar* stands out by highlighting passive neglect and social exclusion within a communal context.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that filial relational rupture is a progressive process wherein shifts in social identity alienate individuals from their familial roots, culminating in rejection, denial, or neglect. The concept of morally charged landscapes illustrates how catastrophic events transform physical spaces into enduring symbols of ethical significance, reminding communities of their shared heritage. Upward social mobility itself is not framed as inherently immoral; rather, the ethical failure occurs when individual success leads to the abandonment of one's origins and social obligations.

These comparative findings inform a five-stage pedagogical sequence: identifying, comparing, interpreting, recontextualizing, as well as reflecting and creating. This instructional framework treats legends as literary texts, cultural literacy resources, and tools for character development. Future research should focus on validating primary textual variants, examining reader reception, designing instructional materials, and empirically testing this comparative methodology within active classroom environments.

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