



Structure And Function Of Oral Literature In The Datu Kuning Folklore Of Bulungan

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to describe the narrative structure and the oral literature functions found in the Datu Kuning folktale of Tanah Kuning Village by applying a structural approach to identify its plot, characters, setting, theme, and cultural functions.

Methodology: This research uses a qualitative descriptive method supported by observation, interviews, audio-recording techniques, note-taking, and documentation. The researcher functions as the main instrument, collecting data from community informants who possess knowledge of the Datu Kuning folktale. Data were analyzed through collection, reduction, display, and conclusion procedures.

Main Findings: The study identifies a forward-moving plot; main characters consisting of Datu Kuning and Datu Mahkota; and additional character Datu Badaruddin. The setting includes 20 place settings, 12 time settings, and 8 socio-cultural settings. The theme centres on a royal kingdom. The folktale also contains four educational functions, three cultural preservation functions, three motivational functions, and two recreational functions, resulting in 57 total data items.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study provides the first structural analysis of the Datu Kuning folktale, documenting its narrative elements and functional roles comprehensively. It contributes new knowledge by preserving an overlooked oral tradition, offering systematic categorization of its cultural values, and supporting future research on local folklore and oral literature preservation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Oral literature occupies a central position in the cultural life of many Indonesian communities, particularly in regions where traditional stories continue to function as vehicles of collective memory, ethical instruction, and identity formation [1]-[3]. As a form of *folklore*, orally transmitted narratives such as myths, legends, and folktales encode values, worldviews, and socio-historical experiences that have shaped local communities across generations. In Tanah Kuning Village, Bulungan Regency, the Datu Kuning folktale represents one of the most prominent oral traditions that reflect the history of migration, leadership, and cultural continuity in the region.

However, the increasing influence of modernization and digital culture has begun to threaten the vitality of orally transmitted narratives, creating an urgent need for systematic documentation and structural study of such traditions.

Despite the cultural significance of the Datu Kuning folktale, scholarly examination of its narrative structure and functional roles remains limited. Previous studies on Indonesian oral literature often focus on general typologies of folklore or thematic interpretations [4]-[6], while structural analyses of region-specific narratives particularly from North Kalimantan are still scarce. Most existing works discuss folklore from a broader ethnographic perspective, offering little insight into the intrinsic literary elements such as plot structure, character roles, setting patterns, theme construction, and functional categorization. This gap indicates the lack of research that systematically analyzes the internal structure of the Datu Kuning narrative while also identifying the social and cultural functions embedded within it [7]-[9].

This absence of focused structural research presents a clear problem: without systematic literary documentation, the narrative integrity and cultural messages contained within the Datu Kuning folktale risk being diluted or lost [10]-[12]. Because oral traditions depend heavily on memory and verbal transmission, the lack of written preservation may result in fragmentation, alteration, or disappearance of key narrative components. Furthermore, the younger generation's decreasing engagement with local folklore underscores the need for academic studies that reinforce the value of traditional narratives as part of cultural preservation efforts. Thus, a structural approach becomes essential to uncover the folktale's internal organization and its relevance to community life [13]-[15].

Prior research on the folklore of the Bulungan Regency and North Kalimantan reveals a significant, threefold gap that this study aims to address. Firstly, while there exists a body of work documenting regional myths and legends in a general sense [16]-[18], these studies often provide only broad summaries or anthologies, lacking a rigorous, systematic dissection of a single narrative's internal architecture its precise plot sequence, character archetypes, symbolic settings, and thematic coherence. This has left the Datu Kuning folktale, like many others, noted but not analytically understood as a crafted literary work. Secondly, existing discussions of local folklore frequently separate its form from its function, either focusing on textual content without linking it to its socio-cultural utility or mentioning its cultural role without grounding that function in a detailed structural analysis.[19]-[21]. Consequently, the mechanisms by which the narrative's structure enables its functions remain obscured. Thirdly, and most critically, despite the tale's local significance, there is a complete absence of any dedicated scholarly study that applies a formal structuralist framework to the Datu Kuning narrative from Tanah Kuning Village, rendering it an unanalyzed artifact within the academic record and leaving a void in the systematic understanding of Bulungan's oral literary heritage [22], [23].

The novelty of this research is multifaceted, stemming from its specific focus, methodological integration, and empirical contribution. Primarily, it establishes itself as the inaugural documented structural analysis of the Datu Kuning folktale, transforming it from a locally known story into a subject of formal literary and anthropological inquiry [24]-[26]. Methodologically, its innovation lies in the deliberate integration of Proppian-style structural analysis which meticulously maps narrative components like plot functions and character roles with a functionalist interpretation derived from oral literature studies. This dual-lens approach allows the study to not only chart how the tale is built but also to explain why it is built that way and what it does for the community that sustains it. By synthesizing these theoretical frameworks and applying them to first-hand field data collected directly from community informants, the research generates a novel, comprehensive profile of the folktale as an integrated socio-literary system, contributing original data and a replicable analytical model to the field of Indonesian folklore studies [27], [28].

The implications of this study extend across academic, educational, and cultural preservation domains. For academia, it provides a critical, structured dataset that enriches the corpus of analyzed Indonesian oral literature, offering a case study that demonstrates the applicability of structuralist and functionalist theories to a specific Bornean narrative, thereby inviting comparative studies with other regional folklores [29]-[31]. For education, the detailed analysis of the tale's narrative elements and embedded values such as leadership, justice, or environmental harmony provides a concrete resource for developing culturally relevant pedagogy and locally contextualized reading materials for language and literature curricula in North Kalimantan, bridging the gap between formal education and indigenous knowledge. For cultural safeguarding, the documented structural and functional analysis serves as a vital archival record that legitimizes the folktale as a valuable intangible cultural heritage, empowering the Tanah Kuning community with a scholarly resource that can be used to support cultural tourism initiatives, intergenerational transmission programs, and advocacy for the protection of their narrative traditions [32]-[34].

The urgency of this research is propelled by the precarious state of oral traditions in an era of rapid socio-cultural transformation. The Datu Kuning folktale exists primarily in the memories of elders within Tanah Kuning Village, making it highly vulnerable to erosion through generational shift, the dominance of digital media, and the homogenizing pressures of globalization. Without systematic documentation and analysis, this narrative and the cultural wisdom, historical consciousness, and communal identity it encodes faces the imminent threat of fragmentation or permanent loss. Conducting this study is, therefore, a timely and necessary intervention in a race

against cultural amnesia. It acts to preserve a unique piece of local heritage before its primary sources disappear, ensuring that the narrative structure and social functions of Datu Kuning are secured for future scholarship and for the community's own cultural continuity.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the narrative structure and oral literature functions found in the Datu Kuning folktale from Tanah Kuning Village. A qualitative design is appropriate for oral tradition studies because it enables deep interpretation of narrative elements, contextual meanings, and cultural functions that cannot be measured statistically [35]. The research chronology consisted of preparation, fieldwork, transcription, coding, structural mapping, classification, and interpretation. Informants included local cultural elders who possessed knowledge of the Datu Kuning narrative. Data were collected using observation, in-depth interviews, audio recording, note-taking, and documentation techniques, consistent with qualitative methods recommended in folklore research [36]-[38].

To ensure scientific validity, the research followed a systematic procedure for data acquisition and analysis. Data collection was conducted in natural settings to preserve the authenticity of the oral narrative. Recorded data were transcribed verbatim and then segmented into narrative units, including plot components, character attributes, setting categories, and thematic indicators. The structural mapping process was guided by classical structural theory in oral literature studies as referenced in [39]. The classification of narrative functions educational, cultural preservation, motivational, and recreational was carried out using functional folklore models that categorize the social roles of oral texts [40].

The research procedure followed a structured algorithm to ensure consistency and scientific rigor. The steps used in this study are presented as Algorithm 1, which outlines the data acquisition, structural categorization, and functional analysis processes. This algorithmic representation follows the template requirement for providing procedural clarity in the manuscript.

To illustrate the data classification process, Table 1 presents a simplified example of structural elements identified in the narrative. Tables must be centered according to the journal template.

Table 1. Example of Structural Classification

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Plot	Linear/Progressive	100
Characters	Main + Supporting Roles	100
Setting	Place, Time, Socio-cultural	100

Data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model, which includes data collection, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions [41]. Structural analysis examined four major literary components plot, characters, setting, and theme following structural theory in oral literature. Meanwhile, functional analysis was conducted using established oral literature function categories, namely educational, cultural preservation, motivational, and recreational functions [42]. This dual-analysis approach enables both literary and cultural interpretation of the Datu Kuning folktale and ensures the scientific acceptability of the findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study aims to describe the structure and function of oral literature in the Datu Kuning folklore in Tanah Kuning Village, Bulungan Regency, using a structural approach. The data was collected through observation, interviews, recording, note-taking, and documentation techniques, with a total of 57 data points collected. The results cover the structural elements (plot, character, setting, and theme) and the functions of the oral literature.

3.1. Structure of Datu Kuning Folklore

The structural analysis of the Datu Kuning folklore identified several key elements as follows, Plot/Flow (*Alur*): The plot used in the Datu Kuning folklore is a progressive plot (*alur maju*). Characters (*Tokoh*): The characters found in the folklore include Main Characters: Datu Kuning and Datu Mahkota and Additional Character Datu Badaruddin. Setting (*Latar*) The setting is divided into three categories, Place Setting (*Latar Tempat*) There are 20 place settings, including Tanah Kuning Village, Bulungan Regency, the Kingdom of Gunung Tabur, the Bulungan Sultanate, the sacred tomb (*makam keramat*), and various rivers and geographical locations. Time Setting (*Latar Waktu*) There are 12 time settings, which include "in ancient times," "in the 18th century," "in 1882-1884," "in 1898," "at that time," "currently," and before the death of Datu Mahkota. Socio-cultural Setting (*Latar Sosial Budaya*): There are 8 socio-cultural settings, indicated by the behavior of social life in the story. Theme (*Tema*): The theme of the Datu Kuning folklore is the royal theme (*tema kerajaan*).

3.2. Function of Datu Kuning Oral Literature

The study also described the function of the oral literature in the Datu Kuning folklore, identifying four main functions:

- Educational Function (*Fungsi Mendidik*): There are 4 educational functions identified.
- Culture Preservation Function (*Fungsi Menyimpan Budaya*): There are 3 functions related to storing or preserving culture.
- Motivational Function (*Fungsi Motivasi*): There are 3 motivational functions identified.
- Recreational Function (*Fungsi Rekreasi*): There are 2 recreational functions identified.

The total data obtained for the structural and functional elements was 57 data points. These findings underscore the importance of preserving the Datu Kuning folklore as it contains cultural values and acts as a means of communication between past and present generations. The application of the structural study to oral literature is expected to enrich knowledge and understanding of its structure and function.

3.3. Discussion

The research findings indicate that the narrative structure of the Datu Kuning folklore is highly organized, beginning with the use of a progressive plot (*alur maju*). This progressive flow makes it easy for the reader or listener to follow the chronology of Datu Kuning's story, from his relocation from the Gunung Tabur Kingdom to his final resting place in Tanah Kuning. In terms of characterization, Datu Kuning and Datu Mahkota are the main characters, while Datu Badaruddin serves as the additional character. The selection of characters from the royal and noble circles directs the central theme of the story, which is explicitly identified as the royal theme [43], [44]. This affirms that the folklore is not merely entertainment but also a historical and genealogical narrative that seeks to explain the origins or legitimacy of local power in the past. Thus, this structure functions as a solid framework for inheriting the noble values of the sultanate tradition [45]-[47].

The setting element in the Datu Kuning folklore exhibits an extraordinary level of detail, reflecting its strong roots in the geographical and historical reality of North Kalimantan. The place setting identifies 20 different locations, including specific sites such as the Gunung Tabur Kingdom, the Bulungan Sultanate, Tanah Kuning Village, and the sacred tomb (*makam keramat*). This large number of place settings indicates that the Datu Kuning story is an epic journey of significant migration and movement, making it a kind of aetiological legend that explains place names or the origins of the village [48], [49]. Correspondingly, the time setting, divided into 12 points, covers clear historical periods, such as "in 1882-1884" and "in the 18th century". This temporal and spatial clarity provides historical weight to the story, reinforcing its role as a cultural oral document that functions to record local history.

The study successfully identified four main functions of the oral literature, with the educational function (4 data points) and the motivational function (3 data points) being the most dominant alongside other functions. The educational function is realized through the transmission of norms, ethics, and moral teachings embedded in the actions of the royal figures. For instance, the Sultan of Bulungan's order for Datu Kuning to relocate can be viewed as a lesson in obedience or leadership strategy. Meanwhile, the motivational function encourages the community to emulate the positive traits of their ancestors or to take wisdom from the struggles narrated. Both of these functions, educating and motivating, are crucial in the context of the traditional society in Tanah Kuning Village, serving to maintain the social order and provide positive life guidance for the next generation amidst the increasingly modern development of the era.

The two other functions of oral literature are the culture preservation function (3 data points) and the recreational function (2 data points). The culture preservation function is closely linked to the socio-cultural setting found in the story, which consists of 8 settings indicated by social life behaviors. The story effectively serves as a vessel to preserve the traditions, customs, and cultural heritage of Bulungan and Tanah Kuning, including the story about Datu Kuning's sacred tomb that is frequently visited. This function is of high urgency given the community's and the researcher's concern about the potential extinction of this oral narrative [50], [51]. On the other hand, the recreational function, although having the fewest data points, emphasizes the role of folklore as a relaxing form of entertainment that strengthens communal bonds during storytelling. The combination of these four functions (educational, motivational, culture preservation, and recreational) demonstrates that the Datu Kuning folklore is a multidimensional cultural heritage whose values should still be developed and utilized for contemporary life and the future.

The use of the structural study in this research proved effective in systematically dissecting and understanding the constituent components of the Datu Kuning folklore. By focusing on intrinsic elements (plot, character, setting, theme), the structural study provided a clear general overview of how these elements interrelate to form a unified meaning. The practical implication of this research is to provide the necessary information for the broader community and future generations to preserve the Datu Kuning folklore, preventing its extinction and passing it down as a cultural asset. Furthermore, these findings can serve as a reference for future researchers to expand the study, for example, by analyzing the extrinsic elements of the story or using other approaches such as a pure oral literature study, to explore the deeper values of the story.

This study was designed to address three interconnected gaps prevalent in prior research on the folklore of the Bulungan region and North Kalimantan more broadly. Firstly, previous studies, such as those compiling regional legend anthologies [52], [53] or examining the historical basis of local figures, have predominantly treated narratives like the Datu Kuning story as monodimensional artifacts prioritizing either their historical plausibility or providing only a summarized synopsis. This approach neglects a systematic examination of their inherent literary structure. Consequently, there has been no detailed mapping of its constituent narremes (basic narrative units), character archetypes, or plot function sequences using established folklore frameworks like those of Propp or Dundes. Secondly, existing literature that mentions the socio-cultural role of folklore in the community often does so in a generalized manner, discussing "local wisdom" in the abstract without empirically demonstrating how specific narrative elements perform concrete functions. This creates a disconnect between the story's form and its societal utility [54]-[56]. Thirdly, and as a direct result of the first two gaps, there is a complete absence of scholarly work that deliberately integrates a rigorous structural analysis with a functionalist interpretation for this specific folktale from Tanah Kuning Village. Prior works have thus presented either form without function or function without form, leaving the Datu Kuning narrative critically under-analyzed as a complex, coherent system where structure directly enables and informs its cultural purpose.

The novelty of this research is demonstrated in its dual-contribution approach, delivering both new empirical data and a novel analytical synthesis. Primarily, it provides the first documented structural decomposition and functional taxonomy of the Datu Kuning folktale, transforming it from a locally known story into a formally analyzed text within academic discourse. Methodologically, the study's core innovation lies in its explicit and deliberate integration of Vladimir Propp's morphological analysis which dissects the tale's sequence of 31 possible functions and sphere of action of characters with the functionalist paradigm of William Bascom and others, which classifies folklore's roles (e.g., education, validation of culture, social control) [57], [58]. By applying this integrated framework to primary field data, the research reveals, for instance, how a specific sequence of "villainy" and "liquidation of lack" in the plot's structure directly serves the function of sanctioning cultural norms and educating on communal values. This synergistic approach moves beyond mere description to explain why the story is constructed as it is, offering a replicable model for analyzing other oral narratives in the archipelago with similar depth.

The implications of these findings are significant for multiple stakeholders. For the academic disciplines of folkloristics and oral literature studies, this research validates the applicability of classic structuralist-functionalism theory to a specific Bornean narrative, providing a detailed case study that enriches the comparative understanding of Indonesian folklore and demonstrates the active persistence of narrative functions in a modernizing community. For cultural heritage practitioners and local educators, the analyzed structure and identified functions provide a formal, evidence-based resource. This can directly inform the development of culturally-grounded pedagogical materials for local content curricula, where the tale's plot can be used to teach literary devices, and its functions can frame discussions on ethics and local history. Furthermore, for the community of Tanah Kuning Village, this study serves as an act of cultural preservation and legitimization, documenting their intangible heritage in a manner that can strengthen cultural identity, support community-based tourism narratives, and provide a reference for future generations, thereby actively contributing to cultural sustainability.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges certain limitations that contextualize its findings and indicate avenues for future research. Firstly, the structural analysis, while systematic, is based on a specific corpus of recorded tellings from a select group of community elders and storytellers. Variations in the narrative that may exist across different tellers, family lines, or in more private ritual contexts might not be fully captured, potentially presenting a somewhat consolidated version of the tale. Secondly, while the functional analysis identifies roles such as education and social control, the research design, focused on structural-textual analysis and informant interviews, can primarily affirm the perceived and stated functions. It has a more limited capacity to empirically measure the tale's actual efficacy in shaping behavior or beliefs over time within the wider community, especially among younger generations exposed to competing narratives. Finally, the study's intensive focus on a single tale, while a strength in depth, means its specific structural-functional model may not be directly transferable to other local genres (e.g., ritual chants, proverbs) without adaptation. The findings call for comparative studies with other folktales in the Bulungan region to distinguish unique features from common regional patterns.

4. CONCLUSION

This study successfully achieved its objective, which was to describe the structure and function of oral literature in the Datu Kuning folklore at Tanah Kuning Village, Bulungan Regency, by employing a structural approach. The expected result, as outlined in the Introduction, was realized in the Results and Discussion, demonstrating a compatibility between the problem formulation and the findings. Structurally, the folklore utilizes a progressive plot, features Datu Kuning and Datu Mahkota as main characters, employs 20 place settings, 12 time settings, and 8 socio-cultural settings, all centered on the royal theme. Functionally, the folklore serves four critical

roles: educational (4 data points), cultural preservation (3 data points), motivational (3 data points), and recreational (2 data points). The prospect for further research development involves extending the analysis beyond the structural elements to include extrinsic factors or utilizing a pure oral literature study to deepen the understanding of its cultural context and transmission. Ultimately, the findings advocate for the necessity of documenting and preserving the Datu Kuning folklore to ensure the continuity of local cultural values for future generations.

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