



FROM RONGGENG TO WHITE CROCODILE: NARRATIVE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND CULTURAL ECOLOGY IN THE MYTH OF SAEDAH–SAENIH FROM INDRAMAYU

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the myth of Saedah-Saenih from Indramayu as a form of oral literature that is alive and continues to be reproduced in various cultural mediums. Through a qualitative-ethnographic approach, this study analyzes written and oral texts, tarling performances, school plays, local films, and ritual practices on the Sewo Bridge. The results showed that despite variations in the details of the storytelling, the core motives—the cruel stepmother, the abandonment of the child, the supernatural pact, and the metamorphosis into the elements of nature—were always present as the basic structure of the narrative. Performative analysis shows that this myth is not only understood as a text, but also as a cultural event that involves interaction between speakers, audiences, and social spaces. Cultural ecology reveals the close connection between mythical figures and the landscape of the Sewo River, where the transformation into white crocodiles, trees, pring ori, and bale kambing confirms the role of myth as a cosmological map of the Indramayu people. From a social and gender point of view, the story reflects ambivalence: on the one hand it reinforces the stereotype of good and bad women, on the other hand it implies an attempt at symbolic resistance through the character of Saenih trying to get out of the snare of poverty. This myth serves a dual purpose: as an ideological device that affirms family values, morality, and religiosity, as well as an arena of cultural resistance that maintains local identity in the midst of modernization. Thus, the Saedah–Saenih myth shows that oral literature not only functions as a textual heritage, but also as a dynamic, meaningful, and relevant cultural practice in shaping the identity of contemporary society.

1. Introduction

Folklore is one of the main products of oral tradition that functions as a medium for conveying values, knowledge, and collective experiences of a community. In various parts of the archipelago, folklore is not only present as entertainment, but also as a marker of cultural identity, a tool of moral education, and an ideological tool that maintains social order. One of the folklore that lives and develops on the north coast of West Java, especially Indramayu, is the story of Saedah-Saenih. This story occupies an important position because it is not only passed down orally, but also present in various performative

forms: told by elders, staged in tarling art, played in school plays, and even brought to the film screen. The presence of these various mediums shows that the story of Saedah-Saenih has gone through a transformation across generations and media, thus making it one of the most popular local myths in the pantura region. The question that arises then is how this myth survives in the midst of social change, as well as what function it continues to play in the life of the people of Indramayu.

The story of Saedah-Saenih tells the story of two siblings who live in poverty, experience the cruelty of their stepmother, and finally end tragically with a supernatural transformation into the elements of nature: Saenih becomes a white crocodile inhabitant of the Sewo River, Saedah becomes a tree on the riverbank, Sarkawi his father becomes a bale kambing, while Maimunah the stepmother becomes a pring ori. This transformation shows how the people of Indramayu link their daily social experiences (poverty, family conflicts, the temptations of the entertainment world) with cultural ecology (rivers, trees, bamboo, and supernatural creatures). Thus, this myth is not just a moral story, but also a cosmological narrative that gives meaning to the living space of coastal communities. The community's belief in the existence of a white crocodile in the Sewo River, as well as the ritual practice of throwing a dime while crossing the Sewo Bridge, shows how this myth still serves as a religious-magical guideline. It is this function that distinguishes the Saedah-Saenih myth from mere popular legends, making it a kind of "*living tradition*" that is constantly reproduced in the form of social and cultural practices.

In previous studies, the Saedah–Saenih myth was understood primarily in the framework of normative mythology: as an ancestral heritage that holds religious, moral, and social values (Purnama, 2016). The main emphasis is on the function of stories as a guide to life, warnings about the dangers of envy, the importance of religious education, and the negative impact of poverty. However, as an oral literature researcher, it is interesting to go further with a new approach. The story can be understood not only as a static text that contains a moral message, but as a performative event that is always present in a particular social context. Tarling, for example, is not only a means of entertainment, but also a medium of mythical transmission that brings together music, poetry, and oral narratives. Similarly, the ritual on the Sewo Bridge, which combines economic practices (tossing change) with a collective belief in safety. This means that the myth of Saedah-Saenih is not just a story that is told, but a "cultural performance" that continues to be updated according to the needs of the supporting community.

This performative approach can be enriched with a cultural ecological perspective (Nur, 2021; Sanjaya & Gandha, 2021). The transformation of story characters into natural elements (crocodiles, trees, bamboo, bale kambing) shows a process of "narrative ecologization," in which myths are used to organize the relationship between humans, space, and nature. The Sewo River is not only the setting of the story, but also a center of local cosmology that contains religious and practical meanings. By tying the tragic story of Saedah–Saenih into a specific geographical landscape, the people of Indramayu make myth a way to naturalize their social experience. So, this study will not only look at the story in terms of content, but also how it operates in the social, ecological, and cultural space of the local community. This approach opens up opportunities to read the Saedah–Saenih myth as a text as well as a context, as a narrative as well as a cultural practice.

Based on this description, this study aims to examine the myth of Saedah-Saenih by emphasizing three main aspects: (1) the narrative dimension, namely the story motifs that form the structure of family tragedy, supernatural transformation, and moral consequences; (2) the performative dimension, namely how the story is present in performing arts, tarling songs, school plays, and rituals on the Sewo Bridge; and (3) the cultural ecological dimension, namely the relationship of myth with the living space of the coastal community of Indramayu. With this interdisciplinary approach, the research is expected to provide a new understanding of the function of myths in the life of contemporary society: not only as a heritage text, but also as a living, adaptive, and meaning-laden cultural practice. This study also enriches the study of oral literature in Indonesia, by showing that local myths still play an important role in shaping identity, values, and relationships between humans, nature, and the supernatural world.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study of oral literature cannot be separated from the discipline of folklore, because folklore is one of the main forms of folklore that is inherited from generation to generation. Folklore is a part of a collective culture that is spread and inherited from generation to generation, both orally and in the form of examples of practice (Danandjaja, 2007); Thursby, 2008). Thus, folktales such as Saedah-Saenih are not just imaginary stories, but a medium of communication that contains values, norms, and ideologies of the supporting community. In this framework, the tragic story of the brothers and sisters from Indramayu can be read as a representation of the socio-economic conditions of the coastal communities of Pantura who are familiar with poverty, family conflicts, and the marginalization of women. Folklor, is "*a mirror of culture*," which is a mirror that reflects social reality (Dundes, 2007). This means that the structure of the story, characters, and conflicts in the Saedah-Saenih myth is actually a projection of the collective experience of the Indramayu people. Furthermore, the position of folklore as part of the oral tradition allows it to be re-staged in a variety of mediums, from tarling performances to modern dramas, all of which show the dynamics of story transmission and adaptation in the context of socio-cultural change. Thus, folklore theory provides an initial framework to understand how the story of Saedah-Saenih lives and survives in society.

In addition to the folklore framework, the performative approach provides an important perspective for reading folklore not only as a text, but also as a cultural event. Oral traditions need to be understood in the context of performance (*Performance*) (Finnegan, 2005) that involve specific speakers, audiences, and social situations (Bauman, 1977). In this case, the story of Saedah-Saenih not only exists as a series of written or oral narratives, but also as a performative practice in the art of tarling, student play, and ritual on the Sewo Bridge. This performative event contains aesthetic, interactive, and social dimensions, because each performance re-presents a story with different emphasises, emotions, and interpretations. Thus, the performative approach allows us to see how folklore is not just a static heritage, but is continuously renewed in the context of social communication of the Indramayu people. Furthermore, the performative concept also shows that the continuity of the story is not only determined by the content of the narrative, but also by its vitality in the events of the performance. This means that the myth of Saedah-Saenih can be understood as a text that lives through socio-cultural "performance", which negotiates the values, identity, and solidarity of its supporting communities.

Myths in the oral literary tradition are understood to be more than just imaginary stories about the past (Angeline, 2015; Sartini, 2014), but a collective knowledge system that functions to explain the origins, instill values, and regulate human relations with nature and the supernatural world (Akmaliyah et al., 2021; Siahaan, 2018). Barthes (1957) referred to the myth as a *second-order semiological system*, which is a sign that works at the ideological level, where social experience is used as a natural-looking discourse. In this context, myths not only tell stories, but also teach the way people understand and interpret the world. Myths serve as *Charter*, which is a cultural charter that legitimizes social and religious practices (Stuart et al., 2022; Joni & Hadiwono, 2023; Rohman et al., 2022). In addition, myths also function as models as well as models-for (Dewi et al., 2018). It reflects reality as well as a guideline for action. Therefore, the myth of Saedah-Saenih is not only the tragic story of two brothers from Indramayu, but also serves to affirm family morality, provide an etiological explanation of the landscape of the Sewo River, and arrange the relationship between the community and supernatural powers through rituals. From a folkloric perspective, myths are the most sacred form of narrative, because they are believed to be true and are linked to belief systems (Rizqika & Hadiananto, 2022). The belief of the Indramayu people in the white crocodile as the incarnation of Saenih shows that this myth still functions as living knowledge (*Living Knowledge*) that affect daily practice. Thus, myth theory provides a framework for reading Saedah-Saenih not only as folklore, but also as a system of meaning that structures the social, religious, and ecological lives of its supporting communities.

In a semiotic perspective, Barthes (1964) Understanding Myth as a Secondary Sign System: A Way of Tagging (*Meaning*) where the mark at the first level is changed to a marker at the second level which is loaded with ideology. Through this lens, the story of Saedah-Saenih can be read not

only as a moral story, but also as a myth that produces social meanings about gender, power, and religiosity. Saenih as a *ronggeng* for example, does not only function as a narrative figure, but as a sign of women's ambitions that are out of the norm, and therefore must be redeemed with a tragic transformation into a white crocodile. Maimunah, the evil stepmother, symbolizes the figure of a seductive woman as well as a threat to domestic harmony, while Saedah is a symbol of loyalty and sacrifice. The overall transformation of the character into natural elements (trees, bamboo, bale kambing, white crocodile) represents the process of twisting, that is, the binding of social experiences into a particular ecological landscape. Thus, the semiotic approach opens up space to read the myth of Saedah-Saenih as a "second language" that produces the social ideology of the Indramayu people, especially related to gender, economic, and morality relations.

Another important theoretical framework is cultural ecology, which looks at how humans, nature, and culture are interconnected in symbolic systems. Cultural adaptation is always related to the environment in which people live (Steward, 1955). In the case of Saedah-Saenih, the transformation of the characters into ecological elements (white crocodiles, trees, bamboo, bale kambing) shows how myths are used to naturalize social experiences into the landscape of the Sewo River. Rivers, trees, and bamboo are not only the backdrop of the story, but also the center of cosmology that the people of Indramayu live through rituals, beliefs, and daily practices. Thus, cultural ecology helps explain why the Saedah-Saenih myth survives not only as a text, but also as a ritual practice that connects humans with the sacred realm. This perspective shows that folklore functions not only as a means of entertainment or morality, but also as an ecological instrument that arranges the relationship between society, living space, and supernatural powers. Through cultural ecology, the Saedah-Saenih myth can be understood as an ecological narrative that unites social, religious, and cosmological aspects into a single unity of meaning.

3. Method

This study uses a qualitative-ethnographic approach with an orientation on oral literature studies. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is not only on the written text of the Saedah-Saenih story, but especially on the oral, performative, and community practices that accompany it. The method used is descriptive-analytical, with research steps including: (1) literature studies to trace various versions of the story, both from classic written sources such as *History of Indramayu* (Ciputra, 2022; Kasim, 2017; Zaedin & Sutarahardja, 2020) as well as academic documentation (Hart, 2012; Nurlelasari, 2017; Full, 2016) and online sources that record variants of the story (Aristyan, 2024; Pranata, 2021; Wiranto, 2020); (2) collecting field data through in-depth interviews with local speakers, cultural experts, and tarling artists who often bring the story of Saedah-Saenih in performances; (3) participatory observation of the performance of tarling, student plays, and rituals at the Sewo Bridge, especially the practice of the community throwing change as a form of respect for Saenih's incarnation as a white crocodile; (4) visual and audio documentation to record performative expressions, body language, and audience interactions accompanying oral performances; and (5) narrative-structural analysis to trace the motives and patterns of the story, combined with performative analysis (Bauman, 1977) who see stories as cultural events, as well as cultural ecological analysis (Steward, 1955) which connects myths with sacred spaces such as the Sewo River. The data were then categorized according to themes (narrative, performative, ecological), verified through triangulation of sources and methods, and then interpreted hermeneutically by considering the social context of Indramayu as a coastal community. With this methodological strategy, the research is expected to produce a comprehensive understanding of the Saedah-Saenih myth as a living text, performance, and cultural practice.

4. Results and Discussion

This section of results and discussion will elaborate on the research findings on the Saedah-Saenih myth by emphasizing the relationship between narrative, performativity, cultural ecology, and the socio-ideological dimension that surrounds it. The analysis was carried out by comparing various versions of the story, both written and oral, and tracing how this myth is present in various forms of

performances and cultural practices of the Indramayu people. The main focus of the discussion was directed at four aspects. First, the narrative and variations that show the differences between the classic versions as noted Dasuki (1964) With the oral version that continues to evolve in society, including a core motif that is consistent but the details always change according to the context. Second, the performativity of the story, namely the presence of myths in tarling, school dramas, and films, as well as ritual practices on the Sewo Bridge which make this story not just a text, but a cultural event that is lived. Third, cultural ecology and sacred spaces, which highlight how the story characters are mythical into the landscape elements of the Sewo River and are closely related to community safety practices. Fourth, the social, gender, ideological, and resistance dimensions, which outline the function of myths as a mirror of socio-economic conditions, gender construction, and ambivalence between social control and symbolic resistance spaces. By elaborating these four aspects in layers, the discussion is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how the Saedah-Saenih myth lived, adapted, and continues to function in the dynamics of Indramayu society, both as a heritage of tradition and contemporary cultural practices.

Story Variations

The written version of the Saedah–Saenih myth recorded by Dasuki (1964) in *the History of Indramayu* features a relatively concise narrative structure, with an emphasis on the origins of the characters and their connection to the geographical space of the Sewo River. In this version, the characters of Sarkawi and Maimunah are portrayed as parents who are a source of disaster for their children: Sarkawi because of his weakness in faith and poverty, Maimunah because of his cruelty and bad habits. Saedah and Saenih eventually experience a tragic fate that leads to a supernatural metamorphosis: Saenih transforms into a white crocodile, Saedah transforms into a tree, while Sarkawi and Maimunah become bale kambing and pring ori, respectively. The structure of the Dasuki version of the story strongly emphasizes the etiological aspect, namely the function of the story to explain the origin of sacred sites around the Sewo River and its surroundings. Here, myths serve as a *charter* or legitimacy for people's ritual practices, such as the habit of throwing dimes on the Sewo Bridge. However, in this version the dramatic dimension of the characters is relatively flat: Saedah and Saenih appear more as passive figures who are victims, while the center of the problem lies in the behavior of their parents. This kind of narrative confirms that children's tragedies are better understood as a direct result of parental moral damage, so that the moral messages highlighted are more normative and didactic.

On the other hand, in the oral version circulating in the Indramayu community, the story of Saedah-Saenih develops more dynamically and dramatically. Local speakers often add details of events, especially related to Saenih's journey to meet a mysterious grandfather in the forest and acquire occult knowledge under certain conditions. This version emphasizes Saenih's ambition to get out of poverty through a shortcut: to become a famous and wealthy ronggeng. However, the success had to be paid dearly when a supernatural contract demanded the soul of Saenih, who eventually transformed into a white crocodile in the Sewo River. Saedah is depicted as a more resigned and sacrificial figure, so he turns into a tree, a symbol of loyalty and steadfastness. In the oral version, there are also variations about Saedah's death: some say he was killed by Saenih in a fight, others say he died of illness and grief. These variations show the vitality of the story as an oral tradition that is flexible and adaptive to the needs of the community. Core motifs such as the cruel stepmother, child abandonment, supernatural precepts, and metamorphosis remain present as basic structures, but the narrative details change according to the context of the narrative. Thus, the oral version presents a richer story from the dramatic side while opening up new interpretive spaces for the audience, especially related to issues of morality, gender, and life choices. This variation is what makes the Saedah-Saenih myth not frozen as a single text, but lives as a collective narrative that is constantly updated by the people of Indramayu.

Storytelling Performativeness

The Saedah-Saenih myth not only lives as a retold text, but also exists as a performative event that binds the people of Indramayu in various forms of folk art. One of the main mediums is the art of tarling, which is a typical Indramayu-Cirebon music and theater performance that combines guitar, flute, song, and dramatic dialogue. In tarling, the story of Saedah-Saenih is often staged with a plot that highlights family conflicts, children's suffering, and tragic transformations in the Sewo River. This performance is usually interspersed with songs that contain moral advice, so that the audience not only enjoys entertainment, but also receives an educational message about the dangers of envy, greed, and excessive ambition. In addition to tarling, this story is also widely adapted in school dramas, both at the junior high and high school levels, as part of arts and culture extracurricular activities. This adaptation serves as a vehicle for character education as well as an introduction to local heritage. In fact, this myth was once raised in the form of a local film, which confirms the popularity of the story as part of Indramayu popular culture. These various forms of staging show how the myth of Saedah-Saenih is constantly reproduced, re-staged, and perceived according to the needs of the audience's context, thus making it not just a folktale frozen in the text, but a performative tradition that continues to live.

Apart from being entertainment and educational media, the myth of Saedah-Saenih is also present in the ritual practices of the people around the Sewo River. The belief in Saenih's incarnation as a white crocodile gave birth to a symbolic tradition: every time he crossed the Sewo Bridge, people or immigrants threw a change into the river as a form of respect as well as a plea for safety. This practice shows that the performativity of myth is not limited to the art stage, but also manifests itself in religious-magical acts performed collectively. In the framework of Richard Bauman's performative theory, this action can be understood as a form of *cultural performance*, because it involves community participation in a symbolic event that affirms mutual beliefs. The dimes that are thrown are not just material objects, but a symbol of binding between humans and supernatural beings who are believed to reside in the river. Thus, the function of myth in this context is not only to entertain or educate, but also to regulate the relationship of humans with supernatural forces and to maintain cosmological balance. The combination of art performances (tarling, drama, film) with ritual practices at the Sewo Bridge reveals the broad spectrum of the performativity of the Saedah–Saenih story: from popular entertainment to sacred rites. This confirms that myth is not only understood as a text, but also as a living cultural practice, which brings together aesthetic, social, religious, and magical dimensions in the collective experience of the Indramayu people.

Cultural Ecology and Sacred Space

The Sewo River occupies a central position in the cosmology of the Indramayu people, not only as a waterway that supports daily life, but also as a sacred space inhabited by supernatural beings. In the Saedah–Saenih myth, this river is positioned as the main location of transformation and tragedy: Saenih is transformed into a white crocodile, Saedah becomes a tree on the riverbank, while Sarkawi and Maimunah are transformed into bale kambing and pring ori. The existence of the Sewo River as the center of the mythical narrative shows how natural space is seen not only in an ecological dimension, but also in a spiritual dimension. For the coastal people of Indramayu, the river is not only a source of livelihood, but also an arena for negotiation with supernatural powers. This cosmology is in line with the view of cultural ecology that man's relationship with the environment is not only material, but also symbolic. The Sewo River became a kind of "sacred space" where myths took root, as well as explaining why the story of Saedah–Saenih was able to survive so long in the collective imagination. The function of the river in myth also strengthens local identity, because the people of Indramayu place the Sewo River as a geographical as well as cosmological marker, which distinguishes it from other areas in the Javanese pantura.

The transformation of the story characters into natural landscape elements is a characteristic of the Saedah-Saenih myth which emphasizes the ecological dimension of the narrative. Saenih, which turns into a white crocodile, becomes a symbol of the supernatural power that resides in the river, as well as a warning about the consequences of ambition and greed. Saedah which transforms into a tree

by the river symbolizes loyalty, sacrifice, and steadfastness, while Sarkawi as bale kambing and Maimunah as pring ori represent the moral destruction of parents that leave their mark on the physical landscape. This transformation shows a process of "narrative ecologization," in which people's social and moral experiences are tied to tangible and recognizable natural objects. Thus, the community not only hears the story, but can also point to material evidence in the surrounding environment that is believed to be the embodiment of myths. This process confirms the close connection between humans, nature, and the supernatural world, so that the landscape of Indramayu is not only understood geographically, but also cosmology. Within the framework of cultural ecology, the metamorphosis of figures into elements of nature affirms the function of myth as a means of integrating social experience into the structure of the living space of society, so that stories serve a dual function: as moral entertainment and as cosmological maps that shape the collective perception of the world.

The connection between the Saedah–Saenih myth and the practice of community safety is evident in the ritual tradition at the Sewo Bridge, where people throw dimes into the river as a form of respect for the white crocodile believed to be the incarnation of Saenih. This practice reflects the belief that safety on the road, especially when crossing accident-prone bridges, is determined not only by technical factors, but also by a harmonious relationship with supernatural forces. Thus, the ritual of throwing money serves as a medium of symbolic communication between humans and sacred creatures that dwell the river. From a performative perspective, this act can be understood as a form of collective performance that affirms cultural identity and social solidarity, since almost everyone who passes by follows the same ritual. From the perspective of cultural ecology, this practice simultaneously affirms that the Sewo River is a space that must be respected and maintained, as it is not only part of the physical nature, but also the spiritual center of society. The ritual also serves as a social control, as it reminds each individual that life is always in a network of relationships with other forces outside of humans. Thus, the Saedah–Saenih myth through the ritual at the Sewo Bridge shows how local beliefs work to maintain cosmological balance, while strengthening the community's bond with their living space.

Social and Gender Dimensions

The Saedah–Saenih myth reflects the social conditions of the people of Indramayu, especially in terms of poverty, family vulnerability, and limited access to education. The character of Sarkawi is described as a father who is weak in faith, poor, and easily influenced by his new wife, Maimunah. Poverty here is not only the background of the story, but also a factor that causes domestic conflicts that lead to the tragedy of their children. In the structure of the coastal community of Indramayu, economic problems are often intertwined with problems of morality and family stability. Thus, the Saedah–Saenih myth serves as a collective reminder that economic crises can drag families to ruin, especially if they are not accompanied by religious education and self-control. This story teaches that the integrity of the family must be maintained with affection and responsibility, not at the expense of children. Socially, this story serves as a mirror that highlights the real problems of the Indramayu community, as well as providing normative guidance on how the family should be managed.

From a gender perspective, this myth features a complex representation of women, with three main figures: Saedah, Saenih, and Maimunah. Saedah is described as a woman who is resigned, faithful, and full of sacrifice, so that in the end she transforms into a sturdy tree on the riverbank. This character represents the ideal of women in coastal Javanese culture: meekness, sacrifice, and acceptance of destiny. On the contrary, Saenih is described as ambitious, daring to step out of the norm, and choosing to become a ronggeng to gain popularity and wealth. The figure of ronggeng in Javanese culture is often seen as ambiguous: on the one hand as a symbol of art and entertainment, on the other hand as a symbol of temptation and moral deviance. Saenih's transformation into a white crocodile reinforces the stigma that ambitious and norm-breaking women must suffer tragic consequences. Meanwhile, Maimunah as an evil stepmother is positioned as an antagonist who destroys the harmony of the household. This representation shows a classic narrative pattern in folklore: good women always end up as symbols of loyalty, while ambitious or evil women must receive cosmological punishment.

Nevertheless, critical reading opens up a wider space for interpretation. Instead of only reinforcing gender stereotypes, the Saedah-Saenih myth can also be seen as a narrative of resistance to women's limitations in traditional social structures. Saenih, for example, despite being eventually cursed as a white crocodile, shows an attempt to break out of the circle of poverty through the performing arts. Her courage to become a ronggeng can be interpreted as a form of women's agency to determine the path of life, although society later interprets it as a moral error. Saedah, on the other hand, with her passive sacrifice, is actually constructed as an idealization that limits women's space for movement. Thus, this myth contains ambivalence: on the one hand preserving patriarchal views of women as good and bad, on the other hand opening up a space for discussion about the position of women sandwiched between traditional norms and the practical need for survival. From the perspective of gender studies, the Saedah–Saenih myth is not only a moral story, but also a symbolic arena where society negotiates values about women's femininity, agency, and morality in the midst of socio-economic pressures.

Myth as Ideology and Resistance

The Saedah-Saenih myth functions as an ideological tool that instills values and norms in the Indramayu community. Roland Barthes (1957) understood myth as a sign system that works at the second level, namely making social experience an ideological discourse. Within this framework, the story of Saedah–Saenih affirms the moral value of the importance of loyalty, the danger of excessive ambition, and the consequences of deviant behavior. The transformation of characters into natural elements serves as a metaphor that reinforces the moral message, so that it cannot be separated from the landscape that is familiar with people's daily lives. The ideology instilled through this myth works subtly: the public is led to believe that the tragic fate of Saenih and her family is a logical consequence of poverty, envy, and violation of norms. Thus, this myth perpetuates the view that social order can only be achieved if each individual submits to the values of the local family, religion, and culture.

However, the Saedah-Saenih myth is not only a dominant ideological instrument, but also holds the potential for resistance. The character of Saenih, although it ends tragically, represents an effort to get out of the snare of poverty by a path that is considered deviant: becoming a ronggeng. In patriarchal societies, this choice is seen as a moral mistake, but it can also be read as a form of symbolic resistance to the social structures that limit women. In the tarling show, for example, Saenih's story is often shown with sympathetic nuances, showing the suffering she experienced before making the decision to become a ronggeng. This opens up the possibility of an alternative reading that Saenih is a victim of an unequal socio-economic structure, not just a violator of norms. Thus, this myth contains ambivalence: it is at the same time a tool of social control to affirm conservative values, but it is also an arena of resistance in which the voices of women and the poor are given a space to articulate, albeit through tragic narratives.

This resistance is also seen in how the people of Indramayu live the myth through ritual practices and performances. The tradition of throwing dimes on the Sewo Bridge, for example, can be understood not only as a form of adherence to supernatural beliefs, but also as a strategy of cultural resistance of coastal communities to the modernization and rationalization of daily life. In the midst of modern currents, this ritual affirms that the supernatural world and ancestral heritage still have authority. Similarly, the staging of the story of Saedah-Saenih in tarling and school drama serves as a form of symbolic resistance to the homogenization of popular culture, by affirming the local identity of Indramayu. Thus, the Saedah–Saenih myth operates on two layers: as an ideology that affirms social and moral order, as well as a discourse of resistance that allows people to negotiate their collective identities and experiences. It is this ambivalence that keeps this myth relevant, as it is able to embrace adherence to norms while providing a symbolic space to express criticism of social injustice.

5. Conclusion

The Saedah-Saenih myth from Indramayu shows how folklore functions as a text, performance, as well as cultural practices that live in coastal communities of Java. Narrative analysis shows that

despite the variation of versions, core motifs such as the cruel stepmother, the abandonment of children, the supernatural precepts, and the metamorphosis into the elements of nature are always present as the basic structures that reinforce moral messages about the importance of loyalty and the dangers of ambition. In the written version, the story appears concise with an etiological emphasis, while the oral version develops dynamically with additional details that reflect social needs and the local imagination. The performative dimension shows that this myth not only serves as an entertainment story, but is also present in tarling art, school plays, and even movies, which relive this tragic story in the midst of contemporary society. Furthermore, cultural ecology emphasizes the close connection between myth and the landscape of Indramayu: the Sewo River, trees, pring ori, and bale kambing become cosmological markers that glue social experiences to sacred spaces. Thus, the Saedah-Saenih myth is proof that oral literature is a knowledge system that unites narratives, performances, and ecological spaces in a single unity of meaning.

Apart from being a moral and educational tool, the Saedah-Saenih myth also works as an ideological tool as well as an arena of resistance. Its ideology lies in the affirmation of social norms: emphasizing that the destruction of the family is caused by poverty, envy, and violations of religious and cultural values. However, on the other hand, this myth also opens up a space for resistance by presenting the character of Saenih as an ambivalent symbol: on the one hand it is portrayed as a woman on the wrong path, on the other hand it shows agency to fight against socio-economic limitations. The presence of myths in the rituals at the Sewo Bridge and the tarling performance can be read as a strategy of the Indramayu people to maintain local identity in the midst of modernization and cultural homogenization. Thus, the Saedah-Saenih myth remains relevant because of its ability to adapt, strengthen social cohesion, and provide a medium for reflection on gender, economic, and religiosity issues. All of these functions affirm that the study of oral literature does not only dwell on texts, but must also read myths as a living, dynamic, and meaningful cultural practice in shaping the identity and cosmology of the supporting communities.

Although this study has elaborated on the narrative, performativity, cultural ecology, and socio-ideological dimensions of the Saedah–Saenih myth, there are a number of aspects that have not been worked on in depth and open up opportunities for further research. First, this study has not comprehensively explored the intertextual practices of the Saedah–Saenih myth in digital popular culture, such as the representation of this story in social media, YouTube videos, or modern literary adaptations, which have the potential to expand the reach of the myth to the younger generation. Second, this research is still limited to the perspective of the local people of Indramayu, so that further research can compare the reception of this myth in the Indramayu diaspora community in other cities, or place it in dialogue with the myth of siblings from other areas of the archipelago. Third, this research has not explored ethnographically the details of contemporary ritual practices on the Sewo Bridge with a long-term observational approach, which has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between myth, economy, and religiosity in daily life. Thus, further research can expand the scope in the digital, comparative, and ethnography realms of rituals, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of how the Saedah–Saenih myth adapts, survives, and is reinterpreted in the dynamics of modern society.

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