

## FOLKLORE STUDIES FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN INDONESIA

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### Abstract

Compared to other social sciences, Folklore Studies, or Folkloristics or merely Folklore, seems to be unfamiliar to most people. Folklore is known in common parlance as foksale or folksong, while in fact it covers a vast array of cultural expressions. Folklorists deal with the materials of expressive cultures (verbal, material, and customary), but what attract them more are the people creating or recreating those materials. In this light, folkloristics confirms itself as a discipline placing high emphasis on humanistic aspects. Folklorists turn their gaze to the group of people and their culture marginalized from dominant discourses and practices. The commitment is to take sides with the unnoticeable and “invisible” form of cultural expressions.

This article is intended to propose two things. First to encourage more studies on folkloric expressions of the Indonesian people. Ideally, the government needs to seriously consider the establishment of folklore departments in Indonesia, or as an initial step, to seriously support folklore performances in many areas of the country. The second is to argue that folklore studies and performances may benefit this country in strengthening its social ties. Humanity scholars and practitioners need to bring to the center the overlooked and marginalized cultural expressions. By doing so, they play roles in promoting inter-cultural understanding by making other people’s culture accessible to and understandable by others. Mutual understanding and then appreciations, I believe, can promote social cohesions among the Indonesian people whose cultural richness is undeniable.

Keywords: *folklore, folklore studies, social cohesion*

### I. Introduction

#### I.1 What are Folklore and Folklore Studies?

Coined in 1846 by William Thoms, the term “folklore” has been understood in many different ways. There are a great number of Folklore definitions<sup>47</sup>, but in general the definitions concern with either the *folk*, that is the people producing the lore, or the *lore*, that is the material of folklore. Martha C. Simms and Martine Stephens (2005) propose a working definition,

Folklore is many things, and it is almost impossible to define succinctly. It’s both what folklorists study and the name of the discipline the work within. Yes, folklore is folksong and legends. It’s also quilts, Boy Scouts badges, high school marching band initiations, jokes, chain letters, nicknames, holiday food ... and many other things you might or might not expect. Folklore exists in cities, suburbs and rural villages, in families, work groups and dormitories. Folklore is present in many kinds of *informal*

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<sup>47</sup> See “Definitions of Folklore” in *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 33, no. 3 (September 1996) pp. 255-264; and Definitions by American Folklore Society at [www.afsnet.org/?page=WhatIsFolklore](http://www.afsnet.org/?page=WhatIsFolklore). Folklore means both what folklorists study and the name of the discipline. An alternative name, Folkloristics, is also used to name the discipline.

*communication*, whether *verbal* (oral and written text), *customary* (behaviors and rituals) or *material* (physical objects). It involves values, traditions, way of thinking and behaving. It's about art. It's about people and the way people learn. It helps us to learn who we are and how to make meaning of the world around us- *emphases added* (2).

Folklore then covers oral and written cultural expressions, custom which refers to a repeated action or a way of doing something, and material culture which has form either permanent or ephemeral. Different from the previous romantic conception of folklore as the materials which only belonged to the "folk" who were illiterate, uneducated, or peasants, folklore is everywhere and practiced and lived by "any group of people whatsoever" (Dundes 1980: 6). This definition yields to an understanding that all people regardless of their origin, level of education, social status, or occupation, can be considered as folk.

Oring (1986: 18-19) gives some orientations<sup>48</sup> to folklore studies. He suggests that the forms of behaviors, objects, and events studied by folklorists are often "oriented" toward two or more of the following concepts 1) the communal which means that the folklore materials studied are collectively owned or shared by a group of people; 2) the common, that the folklore materials are day-to-day practices rather than extraordinary; 3) the informal, that the folkloric materials are not formal or institutional; 4) the marginal, that the folkloric materials are not at the center of power or privilege; 5) the personal, that folklore studies heavily relies on face-to-face communication; 6) the traditional, that folklore studies deals with materials which are handed down from one generation to another, and that the materials are stable over time; 7) the aesthetic, that the folkloric materials bear artistic expressions; and 8) the ideological, that the materials studied express certain belief and system of knowledge and values. Further, Feintuch (2003) asserts the special place of folklorists among other humanistic scholars when stating that,

... folklorists have a distinguished history of work with aspects of culture traditionally not part of the canons of Western academic thought. To be a folklorist has nearly always been to hold an expansive view of human expression and to have a particular interest in the local, the noncanonical, the vernacular... The folklorists' worked in quiet opposition to the historically canonical disciplines-art history, musicology, literary criticism, and other endeavors that favored culture with a capital C (3).

## I.2 Major Genres of Folklore

Folklore can be divided into 3 broad categories, those are, verbal folklore, material folklore, and customary folklore. Verbal folklore refers to the use of words, either oral or written in artistic expressions. Some examples of verbal folklore are legend, myth, folktale, proverb, joke, riddle, local dialect, folk similes/metaphors, or superstition.

Material folklore denotes all expressions which have forms. They are seeable and touchable. Material folklore can be permanent such as architectural forms, tools, clothing, musical instruments, statues, or pottery. It can be also impermanent like food, ornaments, or body painting.

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<sup>48</sup> These orientations are meant to specifically locate the place of folklore studies among the similar social sciences such as Anthropology, Literature or Sociology

Customary folklore refers to a repeated action or way of doing something. It is patterned behavior associated with an individual or a particular folk group. Some examples of customary folklore are gestures, folk beliefs, games, dances, or remedies. However, it is important to keep in mind, that in reality, these genres of folklore are not exclusive to each other. It is quite common that the genres are mixed. In Sumbanese wedding, for example, the verbal folklore is in the use of ritual speech exchanges; the material folklore, in the traditional outfit worn by the bride and the groom, or the gold/metal pendants (*mamuli and mamuli rara*) used mostly as bridewealth; the customary folklore, in the series of rituals which are traditionally practiced by the Sumbanese for generations.

## II. Folklore Studies in Indonesia

The collection of folklore in Indonesia has started in the Dutch colonial time. In 1908, the Dutch government established *Panitia Kesustraan Rakyat* (Committee of Folk Literature) aiming to collect and publish 'traditional' folklore from all over Indonesia. What appeared in the collections was a huge collection of texts (lore) without any information on the context of cultures and performances, and social background of informants (folk). This is understandable because the earlier colonial collectors of Indonesian folklore were heavily influenced by the method of European antiquarians who strived to salvage the remnants of culture of the 'savage' and 'primitive' people, and who perceived folklore materials as antique objects. Other approaches were applied to examine legends and folktales. For instances, H. B. Sarkar made use of Solar Mythology approach to analyze legends of East Java, and Jan De Vries used the diffusion theory of the Finnish School to compare the folktales of Indonesia and those of Europe (Danandjaja 2002: 9-12).

After independence, the urges to seek for a national identity, and for a sense of rootedness in tradition through folklore collections were intensively encouraged by the government. The Department of Education and Culture formed *Komisi Adat-Istiadat dan Ceritera Rakyat* (Commission of Customs and Folktales) assigned to collect and document folk rituals, folk beliefs, folk dances, and folk narratives. The government also built folklore museums such as Taman Mini Indonesia (TMI) museum where kinds of traditional architectures were erected and traditional dances and songs performed; *wayang* (puppet) museums displayed a wide range of *wayangs* from various ethnic groups. James Danandjaja, a 'native' pioneer of folklore research in Indonesia, wrote manuals on how to carry out folklore collection and archives. In 1980, the government cooperating with universities launched a national project to collect folklore materials. Teams of professors and intellectuals were assigned to do fieldworks in and collect folklore materials from various isolated ethnic groups all over Indonesia. However, this project was short lived due to financial shortcomings, and because the teams were unhappy with the government's excessive intervention<sup>49</sup>.

Unfortunately, Indonesian folklore activities in this early 21<sup>st</sup> century have significantly decreased. It is apparently not due to a sense of superiority complexes<sup>50</sup>, but more to the lack of appreciation on folklore and tradition. As a developing country, Indonesia, I assume, gives priorities on the development of science and technology. Young people are more

<sup>49</sup> In a private conversation with Bakdi Soemanto, a professor of American Studies of Gadjah Mada University Indonesia, in 2007, he explained how the government asked him to "fabricate" the tales he collected from the peasants in Central Java. Some of the tales were about murder and incest. The governments saw these stories as being 'unsuitable' to the refined culture of Indonesia, and therefore, he had to omit or edit them. As a protest, he withdrew himself from the team. It seems that Soemanto objected to create "a fakelore" for satisfying the government's nationalistic agenda.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Dundes (1985) implies that suffering from poor self-images, thus inferiority complexes, some countries are triggered to vigorously collect and study their folklore, while suffering from superior complexes, some are less interested in folklore activities (14). Yet, it is not the case in Indonesia.

inclined to enter Computer, Medical, and Engineering Departments in universities while Culture, Literature and Anthropology Departments lure less and less students.

On the higher education level, there is no folklore department in this country<sup>51</sup>. Studies of folkloric expressions merely materializes in students' papers, thesis, and dissertation from other humanities programs such as Anthropology or Indonesian Literature (Sastra Indonesia). In his book *Metode Penelitian Folklor*, Endraswara (2009) suggests that folklore researches do exist but they are usually made for short-termed projects such as seminar presentation or journal writing. Indonesian folklore in international journals is still rarely found. Furthermore, the government seems to overlook the existence of folklore studies and the benefits it may offer for the nation building (23). There are some books or modules which actually can trigger folklore studies in Indonesia. Say for examples, *Folklore Indonesia* (Danandjaya 1984); *Mutiara yang terlupakan, Pengantar Studi Sastra Lisan* (Suripan Sadi Hutomo, 1993); *Metode Kajian Tradisi Lisan* (Pudentia MPSS, 1998); *Metode Penelitian Sastra Lisan* (Setya Suwana Sudikan, 2001), and *Metode Penelitian Folklor* (Suwardi Endrawara, 2009).

Institutions that are concerned with folklore struggle very hard for survival due to lack of supports and financial problems. Folklore museums are deserted, and traditional performances are without audience. The assumptions that folklore is a part of the past and people have to look ahead for progress seem to make people overlook the values of folklore in human civilization.

### III. Folklore Studies and Practices for Social Cohesion in Indonesia

Most Indonesian people are well aware and proud of the fact that their country is woven by the fabric of diversity. The founding fathers of Indonesia also realized the plurality of the nation, and therefore pinned it down in the national emblem, the Garuda bird, with the motto of "unity in diversity" in its coat of arms. They knew that diversity could be a factor potentially undermining social cohesion.

What is social cohesion? Jane Jenson (2002) recognizes that definitions of social cohesions are rarely defined explicitly. However, some some working definitions have been proposed by some. Quoting Sharon Jeannotte (2000), Jenson writes that social cohesion is understood as "the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within a country based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all people of the country<sup>52</sup>" (3) What is explicitly stated in the definition is that social cohesion is a process rather than and an end state. Social cohesion is something that a country needs to continously work on to maintain it. Social cohesion also requires bonds of solidarity through shared values, challenges, and opportunities. People in a nation are glued when they experience a collective sense of identities, or have the feeling of belonging to the nation.

<sup>51</sup> Folklore studies has been established in developed countries such the US and Canada. There are 16 universities offering PhDs and 22 universities offering Masters degreea in Folklore or Concentrating on Folklore. Meanwhile, there are 21 universities providing undergraduate majors, minors and concentrations in Folklore ([www.afsnet.org/?page=WhereToStudyFolklore](http://www.afsnet.org/?page=WhereToStudyFolklore)). In Europe, folkore studies programs are offered at Aberdeen University, University of Helsinki. In Asia, folklore programs are quite a few: Seijo University with its Institute of Folklore studies working to conduct research and survey on folklore, collect and store records and literature on the subject ([www.seijo.ac.jp/en/research/institutes/folklore/html](http://www.seijo.ac.jp/en/research/institutes/folklore/html)). In Indonesia, Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya, University of Indonesia, offers one course of folklore: Folklore dan Seni di Asia Tenggara. Since 2014, the Faculty of Language and Arts of Soegijapranata Catholic University Semarangas offered an elective course on Introduction to Folklore.

<sup>52</sup> Jeannotte actually talks about social cohesion in the context of Canada. Yet, I believe that this definition is relevant to another country as well.

Pluralist society like Indonesia is inherently prone to conflicts. Some provinces loudly and clearly state that they want to break up from the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Unfair economic opportunities, history manipulation of integration, or religious sentiments usually come up as the reasons of disintegration.

In this paper, I donot intend to discuss the key factors functioning to preserve and then ensure the social cohesion in Indonesia. Some people may propose “tips of social cohesions” from different perspectives. Economists might say that fair and just distribution of economic resourses to all Indonesian will give a sense of having equal opportunity of betterment to all Indonesian citizens. Politicians might talk about effectively socializing Pancasila as the basic and ideological principle to keep Indonesia intact. What I intend to do is to argue that folklore may play role as a social capital, the glue which holds the plural Indonesia together.

As mentioned somewhere in this paper, folklore studies is an activity of taking sides. Folklore studies and performances aim to bring to the center not only various kinds of cultural expressions, but also and above all those that are marginalized, unofficial, and unordinary. They “give voices” to the cultures placed in the periphery of dominant ones.

How can folklore studies and performances contribute to social cohesions in Indonesia? First, by bringing up to the surface the diversity of folkloric expressions through studies or performances, Indonesian people learn about the information and wisdom of human experiences through generations. Naturally, folklore becomes the original for of transmitting pedagogical values. Sharing folklore from different group of ethnics in Indonesia, for instance, means providing rooms for cross-cultural understanding. When two people originating from different cultural backgrounds know each other, then they are most likely to accept and tolerate each other’s existence.

Knowing each other’s culture paves a way to mutual appreciation and respect since it kicks away prejudice and hatred. In this way, folklore serves its contribution in creating and maintaining social cohesions. It can be used as a kind of community-binding process, a way of expressing and strenthening people’s sense of cohesion. The shared knowledgeof the content of folklore weaves community (on highest level, nation) solidarity. When sharing folktales, sayings, jokes, someone might find out that he has something in common with other people, and this gives him and the other “a sense of us.”

One prejudice, or it indeed has a grain of truth in it, frequently appear in coffee shop’s or other informal chats is that Indonesian culture is associated with Javanese’s. Indonesia means Java. The dichotomy of majority and minority group still cause serious challanges to the nationhood of Indonesia. Ethnic and religious-based prejudices still a serious issue to work on in order to strengthen social cohesions in this country. In tandem with improvement in social and economic aspects of life, a promotion of culture from different ethnics in Indonesia through studies (academic folklore) and performances (applied folklore) need to be encouraged in order to enhance social cohesions.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Folklore needs to be incorporated in school curriculum. The government needs to launch a national program to collect and write about Indonesian folklore. Students are given opportunities to learn about and enjoy folklore materials from different cultures, and ideally to do folklore performances for the purpose of building cross-

culture awareness. On higher education, students from relevant disciplines are encouraged to document and write about family traditions, folk narratives, customs and rituals, etc<sup>53</sup>. I also envision the establishment of Folklore Department or Institute in Indonesian universities. It is ironical that a country which is extremely rich in folklore has not had one.

2. It is about time to have Indonesian Folklore Society which accommodate academic folklorists and folklore practitioners to carry out researches and performances. This society can function as a laboratory of culture, to which Indonesian people and the world turn their gaze to see the face of diverse Indonesia.

#### IV. Conclusion

Some claim that now Indonesians have quickly lost their cultural identities, traditions, and national pride, and suffered from inferiority complex. There is a saying: *Orang Indonesia sekarang lebih barat dari orang barat* (Indonesians nowadays are more westernized than the Westerners themselves). How exaggerated and romantic these claims might be, yet there is certainly an urgent need to revitalize the study and the performance of folklore in Indonesia. The roles of the government, intellectuals, and folklore practitioners to re-initiate this endeavor are inescapable. Folklore studies and performances can play roles in creating and strengthening social cohesions. They give rooms for respect and appreciation to differences. By exposing variously folkloric expressions from all over Indonesia, this country is working on watering its cohesion. Therefore, Indonesian people need to keep realizing their diversity and put serious efforts to maintain their unity in spite of diversity.

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<sup>53</sup> I have supervised some undergrad students at the Faculty of Language and Arts of Soegijapranata Catholic University to write some folklore items (among others, Dutch Batik, Batik Bakaran, Asrah Batin Ritual, and lucky-charm Maneki-neko) for their thesis.

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