Reconstructing Local Myths through Animation as a Visual Approach to Cultural Preservation

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Abstract. This study explores the potential of animation as a visual medium for reconstructing local myths and preserving cultural heritage in contemporary society. Amid rapid globalization and digitalization, many local myths are at risk of fading from public consciousness. The objective of this research is to analyze how animation can serve as an effective storytelling tool to revitalize and transmit traditional narratives to younger generations. Using a qualitative method with a case study approach, the study examines selected animated works that reinterpret local myths from various regions in Indonesia. The findings indicate that animation provides a dynamic platform to reintroduce mythological elements through engaging visuals and narratives while maintaining cultural authenticity. Moreover, the integration of modern visual techniques helps bridge the generational gap, making traditional stories more relatable and accessible. This study highlights the role of visual communication in cultural sustainability and encourages further interdisciplinary collaboration in the fields of design, folklore, and education.

Keywords: Animation, Cultural Preservation, Local Myths, Storytelling, Visual Communication

1. BACKGROUND

In today's digital era, local myths and folklore face the threat of gradual disappearance due to the dominance of global popular culture and limited intergenerational transmission. Traditional storytelling, once passed down orally or through live performances, is increasingly overlooked by younger audiences who are more familiar with digital entertainment. This phenomenon not only endangers intangible cultural heritage but also creates a cultural disconnect among younger generations (UNESCO, 2021). In light of this challenge, visual media such as animation offer new pathways for revitalizing and communicating these cultural narratives in a format that resonates with contemporary audiences.

Several studies have emphasized the potential of animation as a medium for cultural education and preservation. According to Furniss (2008), animation is a powerful tool for visual storytelling because of its capacity to convey complex ideas, emotions, and symbolic meanings in an accessible format. Meanwhile, cultural heritage scholars argue that media technology can play a transformative role in sustaining and recontextualizing traditional knowledge (Smith, 2015; Hogsden & Poulter, 2012). Through animation, myths can be reinterpreted without losing their cultural essence, allowing them to reach broader and younger audiences who may not engage with conventional folklore formats.

Despite the growing use of animation in media, few academic works focus specifically on the reconstruction of local myths through animated narratives in the context of cultural preservation. Most existing studies concentrate on the entertainment or educational value of animation, leaving a gap in examining how animation can function as a method of cultural continuity (Ng, 2020). This gap underlines the urgency for more interdisciplinary approaches that combine animation, folklore, and cultural studies to address the decline of traditional narratives.

This research seeks to fill that gap by investigating how animation can be strategically used to reconstruct and preserve local myths. By analyzing selected animated works that depict Indonesian myths, the study aims to identify key visual and narrative techniques that ensure both audience engagement and cultural authenticity. The goal is not merely to modernize myths but to maintain their symbolic and moral values within contemporary visual languages.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to both theoretical and practical discussions on cultural sustainability. It provides a framework for integrating visual communication and heritage preservation, while also encouraging creative practitioners, educators, and policymakers to collaborate in promoting indigenous knowledge through modern media. In doing so, animation becomes not only a tool for entertainment but also an active agent in the preservation of cultural identity.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The reconstruction of local myths through animation draws upon several theoretical frameworks, particularly those related to visual communication, cultural preservation, and narrative theory. At its core, the study is underpinned by the theory of intangible cultural heritage as proposed by UNESCO (2003), which emphasizes the safeguarding of traditions, expressions, and practices transmitted through generations. Myths, as a form of oral tradition, are considered essential components of cultural identity and collective memory, and thus, their revitalization is crucial in sustaining cultural diversity in the face of globalization (Smith & Akagawa, 2009).

From a visual communication perspective, animation is recognized as a potent semiotic system that can transmit cultural meanings through symbols, metaphors, and stylized representations (Wells, 2002). The semiotics of animation allows creators to abstractly but effectively reinterpret mythological characters and settings while preserving their symbolic value. This aligns with Hall's (1997) encoding/decoding model, in which cultural meanings

embedded in visual texts are negotiated by audiences based on shared codes and context. Consequently, the design of animated narratives must carefully balance creative interpretation with cultural authenticity to ensure effective communication and engagement.

In terms of narrative structure, Propp's Morphology of the Folktale (1968) offers a useful analytical framework. Propp identified recurrent narrative functions and character types across traditional folk stories, which can serve as structural guides in adapting myths into animation. This narrative model helps ensure that the essence and pedagogical purpose of the myths remain intact, even when transformed into modern media formats. Additionally, Barthes' (1972) concept of myth as a form of cultural signification further reinforces the idea that myths are not merely stories but systems of meaning that convey collective values, beliefs, and ideologies.

Previous studies have shown how animation has been effectively used to support cultural education and heritage preservation. For instance, Azhar & Ariffin (2019) demonstrated that animated storytelling of Malay folklore enhanced cultural appreciation among children. Similarly, Cheng (2020) found that animations based on Chinese legends significantly improved youth engagement with traditional narratives. These works support the potential of animation not only as an entertainment medium but also as a culturally sensitive pedagogical tool.

Based on these theoretical perspectives and empirical insights, this study is grounded in the assumption that animation can serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity. Although the hypothesis is not explicitly stated, the underlying premise is that the creative use of visual storytelling will enhance the preservation and transmission of local myths in a way that is accessible and appealing to younger audiences, thereby contributing to cultural sustainability.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach to explore the reconstruction of local myths through animation as a visual strategy for cultural preservation. A qualitative method is suitable for investigating complex social and cultural phenomena, especially when the aim is to interpret meanings and understand processes rather than measure variables (Creswell, 2013). The case study design allowed the researcher to analyze selected animated works that reinterpret local Indonesian myths, focusing on how cultural elements are visually and narratively represented.

The population of this study consists of animated films and series produced between 2018 and 2023 that were inspired by local Indonesian myths and distributed via online platforms such as YouTube or regional film festivals. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which is appropriate for selecting information-rich cases that offer meaningful insights related to the research objectives (Patton, 2002). Three representative animated works were selected based on the following criteria: (1) the presence of identifiable mythological content, (2) the use of traditional visual elements, and (3) accessibility for analysis.

Data collection techniques included document analysis and visual content analysis. The researcher examined visual elements (such as character design, color symbolism, and setting) and narrative structures (such as character archetypes and plot sequences) within each animation. These data were supported by secondary materials such as production notes, interviews with animators (when available), and viewer comments to understand audience reception.

The analysis technique used was thematic analysis, which enables the identification and interpretation of patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Visual semiotic analysis based on Barthes' theory (1972) was also employed to decode cultural symbols embedded in the animation. The combination of thematic and semiotic approaches enabled a comprehensive understanding of how myths are reconstructed visually and narratively.

The research model assumes that visual storytelling through animation (A) influences cultural preservation (C) through two mediating variables: symbolic representation (B1) and audience engagement (B2). The model can be written as:

A → B1 → C and **A → B2 → C**,

where:

A= Animation-based Visual Storytelling,

B1= Symbolic Representation of Mythical Content,

B2= Audience Engagement and Interpretation,

C = Cultural Preservation Outcome.

This conceptual model is based on the theoretical framework developed from previous literature (Wells, 2002; Hall, 1997; Cheng, 2020) and serves to guide the interpretation of findings rather than for statistical testing. The reliability of thematic coding was ensured through researcher triangulation, and any discrepancies in interpretation were resolved through discussion to improve analytic validity.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collection was conducted from January to March 2025 through a visual content analysis of three Indonesian animated works: *"Legenda Batu Menangis" (2020)*, *"Putri Tandampalik" (2021)*, and *"Si Kancil dan Buaya" (2019)*. These works were selected from YouTube and national short film festivals for their explicit adaptation of traditional Indonesian myths. The animations originate from Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Java, respectively, representing a diversity of local cultural contexts. Supplementary data were drawn from viewer comments, behind-the-scenes interviews, and creators' production notes when available.

Thematic analysis revealed three dominant themes across all works: (1) preservation of cultural identity through visual codes, (2) reinterpretation of mythological values in modern narrative forms, and (3) audience engagement through hybrid traditional-modern aesthetics. These themes support the premise that animation serves as a dynamic medium that bridges the gap between traditional myth and contemporary youth culture (Azhar & Ariffin, 2019; Cheng, 2020).

Table 1. Visual and Narrative Strategies Identified in Selected Works

No	Animation Title	Visual Strategy	Narrative Approach	Cultural Element Highlighted
1	Legenda Batu Menangis	Stylized batik motifs; earthy palette	Classic moral tale with flashbacks	Dayak oral tradition, filial piety
2	Putri Tandampalik	Songket pattern design; soft animation	Voice-over narration & female hero	Bugis royal myth and local beliefs
3	Si Kancil dan Buaya	Comic-style frame and slapstick tone	Fable format with modern dialogue	Javanese humor, wisdom values

Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

The symbolic use of cultural motifs such as batik, songket, and traditional architecture visually encodes local identity within the animated narrative. According to Barthes (1972), these cultural signs function as visual myths, transmitting ideological meaning beyond the literal image. For example, in *Legenda Batu Menangis*, the recurring motif of woven fabric symbolizes both cultural continuity and maternal sacrifice, echoing Propp's (1968) character function of the "donor" in folktales.

Audience reception, as observed through online comments and viewer reviews, also confirmed that such animated retellings increased cultural awareness among young viewers. Comments frequently highlighted phrases like "I finally understand this story," or "the animation made it easier to remember," supporting Hall's (1997) theory that representation

becomes meaningful when encoded with familiar cultural codes and decoded by audiences through shared context.

Interestingly, the narrative adaptation did not always preserve the myth in its entirety. In *Putri Tandampalik*, for instance, the original story's tragic ending was altered into an empowering feminist message. This creative reinterpretation aligns with Wells' (2002) view of animation as a genre of authorship, wherein creators adapt content for contemporary sensibilities while retaining symbolic roots. While purists might view this as deviation, it demonstrates how myths evolve dynamically, responding to new social narratives.

In contrast to earlier studies that focused primarily on folklore education (e.g., Azhar & Ariffin, 2019), this research highlights a stronger integration of visual semiotics and participatory audience culture, where animation becomes a two-way cultural dialogue rather than a one-way transmission. As such, the findings extend Cheng's (2020) insights on animation's pedagogical power by emphasizing its aesthetic, communicative, and emotional dimensions.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the notion that cultural preservation is not about static repetition but about **contextual reinterpretation**. Practically, it suggests that animators, educators, and cultural institutions should collaborate to produce culturally sensitive visual content that appeals to digital-native generations. Future development may include interactive myth-based animation games or AR experiences, expanding the medium's potential impact.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that animation serves as an effective visual medium for reconstructing local myths and preserving cultural heritage in ways that are accessible and appealing to younger audiences. The integration of traditional visual elements and narrative structures within contemporary animation not only enhances cultural representation but also fosters audience engagement and symbolic interpretation (Barthes, 1972; Wells, 2002). While adaptations sometimes involve creative reinterpretations that diverge from the original myths, such transformations reflect the dynamic nature of cultural transmission in a digital era (Hall, 1997). Therefore, the use of animation can be seen as a strategic approach to sustaining intangible cultural heritage, particularly when supported by interdisciplinary collaboration among animators, educators, and cultural institutions (Cheng, 2020; Azhar & Ariffin, 2019). However, due to the limited number of case studies and region-specific samples, the generalizability of this research remains cautious. Future research is recommended to include a broader range of mythological sources, interactive media formats,

and participatory audience studies to deepen our understanding of animation's role in cultural sustainability across diverse sociocultural contexts.

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