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Theoretical paper

GENDER, HERITAGE, AND SUSTAINABILITY: INTEGRATING NORTH SUMATRAN ORAL LITERATURE INTO EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Oral literary traditions function as sophisticated mechanisms of gender regulation while preserving valuable environmental knowledge, creating complex challenges for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) implementation. This study examines oral literature across Tamil, Chinese, and Malay communities in North Sumatra through feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks to analyze their pedagogical potential for culturally responsive sustainability education. Using ethnographic methodology, we documented folktales, pantun, ritual practices, and environmental traditions, examining how these materials construct gender roles and ecological relationships. The comparative analysis reveals that patriarchal ideologies adapt their justifications to diverse cultural contexts while maintaining consistent outcomes of female subordination. Tamil traditions use Hindu mythology, Chinese narratives emphasize Confucian virtue, and Malay texts invoke Islamic equality alongside practical limitations. However, these same traditions contain sophisticated ecological knowledge about sustainable resource management and community cooperation. The findings demonstrate that traditional knowledge systems require critical engagement rather than wholesale adoption in ESD curricula. While oral literature offers valuable environmental wisdom and cultural legitimacy for sustainability education, embedded gender hierarchies' conflict with ESD principles of inclusive participation. Effective integration demands explicit analysis of cultural contradictions to preserve ecological knowledge while challenging patriarchal structures.

Keywords: *Oral Literature; Education for Sustainable Development Society (ESDS); gender equality; environmental preservation; cultural heritage.*

1. Introduction

Oral literature functions as a cultural archive and teaching resource. These narratives transmit environmental knowledge and social values across generations (Berkes, 2012; Aini et al, 2023). As crises intensify, educators turn to indigenous knowledge systems for culturally responsive learning (UNESCO, 2017; Sterling, 2011). Indriyanto (2021) argues we need a "sense of planet" that values locality within—not apart from—global ecological consciousness. This reconciles local wisdom with global sustainability frameworks. Education for Sustainable Development Society (ESDS) follows this logic. It transforms education by integrating environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions into curricula. Traditional oral literature appears ideally suited for ESDS implementation, offering both cultural legitimacy and ecological wisdom. However, this integration presents a fundamental tension. While oral traditions provide culturally grounded sustainability education, they simultaneously encode gender hierarchies that contradict ESDS equity principles (Smith, 2012; Cajete, 2000).

Indonesia's extraordinary diversity—with over 700 languages across 17,000 islands—makes it crucial for examining oral traditions' educational potential (Ethnologue, 2023; Adelaar & Himmelmann, 2005). North Sumatra exemplifies this complexity. Indigenous Malay and Batak communities coexist with Tamil, Chinese, Javanese, Sundanese, and Acehnese populations (Reid, 2004). Each maintains distinct oral literary traditions embodying unique worldviews and ecological consciousness (Takari, 2018; Sibarani, 2014). These traditions function as repositories of sustainable resource management practices and conflict resolution mechanisms (Norberg-Hodge, 1991). However, they remain marginally documented and pedagogically underutilized.

Current ESD implementation faces empirical challenges globally and locally. First, standardized curricula often ignore indigenous knowledge systems, creating a disconnection between education and lived experience (Smith, 2012; Cajete, 2000). Second, gender equality initiatives frequently clash with traditional cultural values, generating community resistance (UNESCO, 2020). Third, environmental preservation efforts often lack traction without local cultural legitimacy, a particular challenge in diverse regions like North Sumatra. These tensions demand approaches that critically engage rather than uncritically adopt traditional knowledge.

This research addresses three interconnected gaps. First, existing documentation focuses on dominant narratives, leaving minority oral traditions—such as the endangered *dedeng* tradition of Malay Langkat—inadequately recorded (Danandjaja, 1991). Second, scholarship rarely examines how the same oral traditions simultaneously preserve environmental wisdom and perpetuate gender subordination. Third, no framework exists for integrating oral literature into ESD curricula while addressing embedded patriarchal ideologies.

Our theoretical approach combines several frameworks. Budhisantoso's (1981) conceptualization of oral traditions as cultural capital repositories provides anthropological grounding. Contemporary ESD theory advocates transformative

education integrating environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions (Sterling, 2011; UNESCO, 2020; Saddhono et al., 2024). We extend these through feminist and postcolonial ecocritical lenses that reveal how cultural heritage functions as both resource and constraint (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007; DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011 ; Dewi & Indriyanto, 2023).

We employed qualitative ethnographic methodology across Tamil, Chinese, and Malay communities in Medan and Langkat. Data collection combined participant observation, in-depth interviews, and audiovisual documentation of folktales, proverbs, riddles, folk songs, myths, and legends (following Pudentia's classification in Sibarani, 2014). Analysis examined moral and ecological values within these texts, focusing on environmental conservation and gender construction—two areas where cultural heritage most directly intersects ESD objectives (Nasution, 1989; Hanurawan, 2016).

This study makes three contributions. First, it expands the documented corpus of North Sumatran oral literature from underrepresented communities, preserving endangered traditions like Malay *dedeng*. Second, it provides the first comparative analysis of how diverse ethnic traditions construct gender while encoding environmental knowledge. Third, it offers a critical pedagogical framework for ESD implementation that preserves ecological wisdom while challenging patriarchal structures. Rather than wholesale adoption or rejection of traditional knowledge, we demonstrate how explicit analysis of cultural contradictions enables culturally responsive yet equitable sustainability education.

The significance lies in demonstrating that cultural heritage and progressive values need not conflict when approached critically. Oral literature preservation can serve both local revitalization and global sustainability objectives, but only through frameworks that acknowledge and address ideological tensions. This approach models how culturally grounded ESD can honor diverse ways of knowing while maintaining commitment to gender equality—a balance essential for sustainable development in multicultural contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study examines oral literature through frameworks that reveal how cultural heritage simultaneously preserves environmental knowledge and perpetuates gender hierarchies. Althusser's (2006) concept of "ideological state apparatuses" explains how cultural institutions naturalize patriarchal norms through what he terms "interpellation"—individuals internalizing dominant ideologies as truth. Gramsci's (2006) hegemony theory shows power operating through consent rather than force. Butler's (1990) gender performativity reveals how repeated cultural practices create the illusion of natural gender differences. These frameworks illuminate how oral literature functions as both cultural repository and mechanism of gender regulation.

Education for Sustainable Development Society (ESDS) seeks to integrate environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions in transformative education (Sterling, 2011; UNESCO, 2020). North Sumatran oral traditions contain valuable ecological knowledge about resource management and biodiversity

conservation (Berkes, 2012; Takari, 2018). However, this environmental wisdom is often embedded within gendered frameworks that exclude women from positions of authority. Gender equality and environmental knowledge—both central to ESDS—exist in tension within these traditional systems. Budhisantoso (1981) identifies this duality: oral traditions transmit cultural capital including ecological practices while encoding behavioral norms that may contradict equity principles.

Postcolonial ecocriticism provides tools for navigating these tensions. DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) argue that environmental knowledge systems must be understood within colonial and postcolonial contexts. North Sumatra's diverse communities have negotiated complex relationships with land and resources across centuries of political transformation. Spivak's (1988) attention to cultural texts' gaps and silences reveals moments where oral literature offers counter-hegemonic possibilities—instances where women's agency disrupts patriarchal narratives (Indriyanto & Rudy, 2025). This integrated framework enables ESDS implementation that honors cultural heritage and ecological wisdom while challenging embedded inequalities.

3. Religious Ideologies and the Construction of Tamil and Chinese Femininity in Oral Literature

Previous scholarship on South and Southeast Asian gender construction has examined religious ideology's role in shaping feminine identity. Studies of Hindu mythology's influence on Tamil women emphasize how goddess figures like Parvati and Lakshmi establish ideals of wifely devotion and domesticity (Wadley, 1980; Leslie, 1991). Research on Chinese gender systems analyzes Confucian frameworks, particularly how the Three Obediences and Four Virtues institutionalize female subordination (Mann, 2011; Ko, 1994). However, these studies typically focus on single cultural contexts or treat gender construction separately from environmental knowledge systems. Our comparative analysis reveals how different religious ideologies—Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islam—adapt patriarchal frameworks to local contexts while producing remarkably similar outcomes of female constraint.

Tamil oral traditions in North Sumatra construct femininity through Hindu mythology. Religious figures like Goddess Parvati, Lakshmi, and Saraswati work as ideological templates. They elevate women's roles while constraining them. These deities embody fidelity, fertility, and wisdom. They also reinforce female subordination to male authority (Interview with M. Chandra Bose, Shri Mariamman Temple, Medan, 2023). Rituals make this concrete. ***Thaali kettu*** and ***karva chauth*** position women as spiritual mediators. Their primary function: ensuring family welfare. Tamil women become what Althusser calls "interpellated subjects." They accept subordination as divinely ordained, not socially constructed. This has historical roots. Classical Sangam literature divided women into ***akaval*** (guardians of family honor) and ***puram*** (participants in public life). The binary reveres women while constraining their agency—classic patriarchal logic. Contemporary Tamil oral traditions in North Sumatra continue these patterns. Women's domestic confinement appears as cultural preservation, not gender oppression.

This religious framework intersects with historical literary traditions that have consistently positioned Tamil women within restrictive binaries of private virtue and public invisibility. The classical Sangam literature's division of women into ***akaval*** (guardians of family honor) and ***puram*** (participants in public life) reveals the patriarchal logic that simultaneously reveres and constrains female agency. This binary construction creates what Gramsci identifies as hegemonic consent, where women's elevated status as moral custodians masks their systematic exclusion from meaningful social and political power. Contemporary Tamil oral traditions in North Sumatra perpetuate these historical patterns, presenting women's domestic confinement and moral guardianship as cultural preservation rather than gender oppression. Such constructions demonstrate how cultural heritage can function as ideological apparatus, legitimizing gender inequality through appeals to tradition and religious authority.

Confucian ideology constructs Chinese femininity through systematic frameworks that institutionalize female subordination while presenting it as moral virtue. The *Sāncóng* (三从) or Three Obediences establishes lifelong male guardianship by requiring women's obedience to fathers, husbands, and sons. Complementing this hierarchical structure, the *Sìdé* (四德) or Four Virtues prescribes moral integrity (*Dé* 德), proper speech (*Yán* 言), modest appearance (*Róng* 容), and domestic skill (Gōng 功). These culminate in the ideal of Xiánqī Liángmǔ (贤妻良母), the "Virtuous Wife and Good Mother," positioning women as moral anchors whose primary function is family support and child education (Li, 2010). The Chinese proverb 男主外, 女主内 (men handle external affairs, women manage internal ones) parallels Tamil traditions that assign women to domestic spheres while restricting public participation. Tamil verses explicitly delineate this division: "A husband should involve his wife in the gathering and spending of wealth, in maintaining cleanliness, in fulfilling religious duties, in preparing food, and in caring for household belongings." This spatial segregation serves what Hartmann (1981) identifies as the foundation of patriarchal exploitation, where women's unpaid domestic labor subsidizes men's public domain activities.

Our analysis extends existing scholarship by demonstrating how different religious systems converge on similar patriarchal outcomes despite distinct theological foundations. Previous studies document gender construction within single cultural contexts. We reveal the adaptability of patriarchal ideology across Hindu, Confucian, and Islamic frameworks. This comparative approach illuminates what remains consistent—female domestic confinement, male authority, economic dependence—and what varies: the specific religious justifications employed.

Tamil oral literature constructs female loyalty through temporal frameworks that institutionalize passive waiting. One verse declares: "If a husband departs for religious duty, the wife should wait eight years; for education or honor, six years; and for pleasure, three years." This establishes hierarchies of male pursuits that require female sacrifice. Female identity becomes contingent upon male presence. The construction of fidelity as conditional upon male economic provision reveals deeper patriarchal assumptions. Another verse warns that even virtuous women

"may act immorally if burdened by deprivation." This characterizes women as inherently unreliable moral agents requiring constant surveillance. The prescription that "women must be kept dependent day and night, relying on men within their families" institutionalizes perpetual male oversight. It pathologizes female agency while naturalizing male control as protective rather than oppressive.

Contemporary practices show both continuity and contestation. Tamil cinema and popular media still present women as virtuous mothers or sexualized objects. Urban Tamil women challenge these constraints through education and work, yet they carry the "double burden" of professional and domestic duties. Rural and lower-caste women face worse—gender oppression compounds with class and caste discrimination. Still, resistance emerges. Tamil women join anti-caste movements and social reform campaigns. They challenge traditional gender roles and wider structures of inequality. This has significant implications for ESD implementation. Oral literature operates as both ideological reproduction and potential resistance. Previous scholarship misses this tension. Studies treat oral traditions as either oppressive or empowering, not both at once. We show the relationship is messier and more productive for education.

4. The Preservation of Oral Literature in the Langkat Malay Community

Studies of Malay oral traditions have documented their cultural and linguistic significance across Southeast Asia (Wahid &Ain, 2025). Research on Malay pantun emphasizes their poetic sophistication and social functions (Sweeney, 1987; Braginsky, 2004). Environmental knowledge in Malay communities has received attention from ethnobotanical and anthropological perspectives (Ellen, 2006; Zent, 2009). However, these studies rarely integrate gender analysis with environmental knowledge systems, nor do they examine how oral traditions function within ESDS frameworks. Our research advances this scholarship by demonstrating how Langkat Malay oral literature negotiates between progressive gender discourses and traditional hierarchies while encoding sophisticated ecological practices—a complexity essential for culturally responsive sustainability education.

The Langkat Malay community presents a distinct case. Their oral traditions house both progressive and conservative gender ideologies. Tamil and Chinese communities use oral literature to reinforce patriarchal structures through religious frameworks. Langkat Malays are different. Their oral literature negotiates between traditional hierarchies and emerging equality discourses.

Why this complexity? The community occupies a unique position in North Sumatra—indigenous inhabitants who also mediate between ethnic groups. This dual role shapes what gets preserved. Williams (1977) calls this "selective tradition": communities maintain, modify, or abandon cultural elements based on contemporary relevance. The Langkat Malay oral corpus is rich. It includes folktales (hikayat), traditional verses (pantun), ritual chants (mantra), and ceremonial practices. Together these encode gender relations, environmental stewardship, and social organization (Saragih et al., 2025). However, preservation is not neutral. It reflects power dynamics and ideological investments that require critical examination, not celebration.

The Mas Merah folktale illustrates this negotiation. Star-crossed lovers are separated by arranged marriage. Salam "summons his courage" to confess love. The woman responds passively, "shyly lowering her gaze." When her parents arrange her marriage, she complies: "Despite her heavy heart, she obeyed her parents' decision." Her obedience reads as virtue, not oppression. Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory helps explain this. The narrative naturalizes gender roles through repeated telling. Romantic framing obscures patriarchal control. Women's subordination becomes tragic necessity, not social construction. But the tale's popularity signals something more complex. Its emotional resonance suggests community ambivalence toward arranged marriage. Gramsci (2006) would recognize this as hegemonic negotiation—cultural space where dominant norms face quiet questioning. The narrative reinforces traditional practices while simultaneously inviting doubt. This duality distinguishes our analysis from studies that flatten Malay folklore into either pure tradition or simple progressivism.

The environmental traditions of Langkat Malay communities demonstrate how ecological knowledge operates through gendered frameworks that promote collective responsibility while maintaining patriarchal labor divisions. Four environmental pantun and six ritual practices encode what Merchant (1980) terms "organic worldview"—a cosmological framework integrating spiritual, environmental, and social relationships. The pantun "So that the environment remains sustainable, let us protect it together" (*Mari kita jaga bersama*) uses inclusive language suggesting equal participation. Similarly, "Cleanliness must be preserved, because it is part of faith" connects environmental ethics to religious obligation. However, actual practices reveal gendered patterns where women's environmental labor becomes naturalized as domestic extension while men's activities receive recognition as productive work.

The Berahoi harvest tradition exemplifies this dynamic. The practice assigns "men thresh the rice while singing, and women prepare food for the rest period while dancing joyfully." This division appears harmonious, presenting women's labor as equally valuable cultural contribution. Yet characterizing women's work as "joyful dancing" aestheticizes their material contributions while men's threshing receives recognition as primary productive activity. The forest management ritual Mulaka Ngerbah further reveals masculine authority systems. The two-stage process—Njawu Tanah (land blessing) and Ngerbah Hutan (forest clearing)—positions male ritual specialists (pawang) as mediators between human communities and forest spirits. The ritual chant invoking "Siti Fatimah, Siti Salamah, Siti Saodah, Siti Aisyah" references female Islamic figures but places them under male ritual control. This pattern demonstrates how traditional ecological practices honor feminine spiritual power while maintaining masculine environmental authority.

Our contribution reveals how environmental knowledge and gender construction intersect within oral traditions—an integration missing from existing scholarship. Previous studies document either Malay environmental practices (Ellen, 2006) or gender ideologies (Peletz, 1996), but not their connection. We show that sustainable resource management in oral literature operates through

gendered labor divisions and authority structures.

Consider the *tepung tawar* (blessed flour) ritual. This purification practice links environmental work to divine blessing. The chant—"Blessed powder, sincere powder... By the blessing of the Prophet Solomon"—legitimates environmental intervention through male religious authority. Women prepare food and join communal meals, yet their roles stay supportive, not authoritative. The honey harvesting ritual shows ecological sophistication. Practitioners chant "Allow us to take it without your tears," acknowledging bee welfare and sustainable extraction. But men dominate this practice. Women hold traditional knowledge of forest products and plant medicine, yet they remain excluded from direct resource harvesting.

This integrated analysis reveals implications for ESDS implementation that previous scholarship has not adequately theorized. Extracting environmental wisdom from oral traditions requires acknowledging and addressing the gendered frameworks through which this knowledge is preserved and transmitted. Our comparative approach demonstrates that Langkat Malay traditions offer more negotiable gender constructions than Tamil or Chinese systems, suggesting differential strategies for culturally responsive sustainability education. Where Tamil and Chinese oral literature requires direct confrontation of rigid patriarchal ideologies, Malay traditions' existing ambivalence toward gender hierarchies provides pedagogical openings for critical engagement that builds on internal cultural contradictions rather than imposing external values.

5. Conclusion

Our ethnographic work across Tamil, Chinese, and Malay communities in North Sumatra reveals a paradox. Oral traditions preserve environmental wisdom while perpetuating gender hierarchies. The religious frameworks differ—Hindu mythology among Tamils, Confucian ethics among Chinese, Islamic teachings among Malays. But the outcomes converge: women are confined to domestic spheres, and these limitations are celebrated as virtue. Butler's gender performativity explains the persistence. Repeated cultural performances naturalize gender distinctions. They appear biological, not social. But we cannot simply dismiss these traditions. Langkat Malay forest rituals and harvest practices show sustainable resource management refined across centuries. This creates real tension for Education for Sustainable Development Society (ESDS). The framework requires environmental wisdom and gender equality.

These findings point toward differentiated pedagogy. Tamil and Chinese traditions have rigid structures. These require direct critical engagement that explicitly challenges embedded gender oppression. Malay oral literature is messier—progressive declarations sit alongside conservative practices. This creates teaching opportunities. Educators can leverage these internal contradictions, rather than confronting total resistance. Our study has limits. Three communities cannot represent Indonesia's diversity, especially eastern regions with matrilineal traditions. We document narratives but haven't tested actual ESDS curricula. How do young people engage? Do they internalize,

resist, or reinterpret these traditions? Most critically, we capture traditions at one moment. Longitudinal studies could show whether oral traditions ossify or adapt for sustainability transitions.

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