

# Reinterpreting Indonesian Folklore in EFL Education: Symbolic Meaning, Local Wisdom and Generation Z Perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Keywords:</b> Cultural Literacy, EFL Education, Folklore, Generation Z, Islamic Values</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v11i1.2601">http://dx.doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v11i1.2601</a></p> <p><b>How to cite:</b> Irlina, A., Nor, H., &amp; Nisa, T. (2026). Reinterpreting Indonesian Folklore in EFL Education: Symbolic Meaning, Local Wisdom and Generation Z Perspectives. <i>Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics</i>, 11(1), 103-117</p>	<p><i>This qualitative study explores how Indonesian local folklore can function as a literary and pedagogical resource in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education by examining symbolic meanings, educational values, and generational reinterpretation. Focusing on the legends of Princess Mayangsari from the Banjar community and Princess Tadampalik from the Bugis tradition, the study integrates Symbolic Interactionism and Value Theory (Western and Islamic) to analyze how moral, cultural, and spiritual values are constructed and transformed. Data were collected through content analysis and in-depth interviews with 20 Generation Z participants, and analyzed using thematic coding. The findings reveal that traditional symbols such as the sacred sword, mirror, white buffalo, and heirloom kris are reinterpreted by Generation Z within contemporary frameworks of rationality, gender equality, ethical leadership, and digital creativity. Rather than perceiving folklore as sacred and static, participants engage with these narratives as reflective texts that support identity formation and moral reasoning. From an EFL perspective, the study demonstrates that local folklore provides authentic narrative materials that enhance narrative literacy, cultural awareness, and character education. The integration of symbolic analysis and digital storytelling further highlights the potential of folklore-based pedagogy to support critical reading, interpretation, and intercultural competence in language learning contexts.</i></p>

## 1. Introduction

The swift speed of digital transformation and globalization has significantly altered how cultural knowledge and moral values are conveyed, especially among younger generations. Generation Z, as digital natives, interacts with cultural content through interactive,

multimodal technology platforms. This use of technology reshapes their access to, interpretation of, and valuation of traditional knowledge systems (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Smith & Mark, 2001). Recent studies indicate that digital learning environments substantially affect learners' cognitive and emotional engagement and meaning-making, especially in language education (Crawford et al., 2019; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2022). These shifts create challenges and opportunities for preserving and teaching folklore in EFL contexts.

Contemporary developments in EFL pedagogy underscore the need to integrate computer literacy, intercultural competence, and culturally relevant materials to promote meaningful learning. Digital competence now extends past technical proficiency to include socially situated practices such as interpretation, interaction, and analytical engagement with multimodal texts (OECD, 2021; Crawford et al., 2019). As a result, digital storytelling has emerged as an effective pedagogical approach that improves linguistic performance, affective involvement, and creative expression (Chen Hsieh & Lee, 2023; Teng, 2022). Empirical studies show that digital storytelling environments promote multidimensional engagement, enabling learners to construct meaning through visual, textual, and auditory modalities (Peng et al., 2024; Seftika et al., 2025). Additionally, developments such as AI-assisted storytelling expand opportunities for learners to negotiate identity, emotion, and social values within narrative practices (Ramezanzadeh & Ebadi, 2025). Despite these pedagogical advancements, the incorporation of local cultural resources, particularly folklore, remains limited in EFL classrooms, where Western literary texts continue to dominate. This limitation is noteworthy because folklore constitutes a valuable repository of cultural knowledge, moral values, and collective identity. In the Indonesian context, folklore is closely connected to social norms, religious beliefs, and local wisdom, functioning as both a cultural archive and a moral guide (Marsellaa & Putri, 2020). Recent studies show that including local accounts in language learning improves students' cultural awareness, identity formation, and metacognitive development (Hellystia & Hermawati, 2024; Widodo, 2016).

The digital era has transformed folklore. It now needs to be seen as a fluid and evolving cultural system, not just static heritage. Cultural adaptation theory states that traditions survive by ongoing reinterpretation as society changes (Young, 2001). In digital environments, folklore is increasingly reinvented with multimedia formats. This lets learners engage with old narratives in new ways that relate to their lives. Research shows that even though learners use digital cultural content, they often lack the critical skills to interpret its symbols and values (OECD, 2021). This shows the importance of teaching deeper cultural and moral understanding.

From a theoretical perspective, meaning-making in folklore can be studied through symbolic interactionism, which claims that meaning emerges from social interaction and interpretation (Blummer, 1969; GH, 1934). Within stories, symbolic elements such as characters, objects, and events convey moral and cultural values. Recent research on learner engagement supports this perspective, demonstrating that constructing meaning in digital storytelling involves cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal processes (Peng et al., 2024). Simultaneously, value theory contends that narratives establish moral frameworks, enabling individuals to internalize values such as responsibility, justice, and sympathy (Rokeach, 1973; Lickona, 1992). Within the Indonesian context, these values are closely associated with Islamic moral philosophy, which grounds ethics in spiritual awareness and sacred guidance. Educational scholars such as Al-Ghazali and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas maintain that

knowledge and morality are inseparable, and that education should promote both intellectual and spiritual growth. Thus, folklore functions not only as a cultural artifact but also as a medium for transmitting religious and moral values that shape learners' character and worldview.

Despite extensive research on digital learning, storytelling, and values education, these domains are often examined in isolation. This study directly addresses the gap by proposing an integrated framework to understand how Generation Z learners reconstruct moral and cultural meanings from folklore through digital storytelling in EFL contexts. In particular, limited research addresses how symbolic components in folklore mediate Generation Z learners' understanding of ethical and religious values in EFL settings. By synthesizing perspectives from symbolic interactionism, value theory, and cultural adaptation theory, this study aims to clarify how Indonesian folklore can be leveraged as both language and moral text. Specifically, it explores how symbolic representations inside folklore facilitate the interpretation of ethical and spiritual values, and how these meanings are recreated through digital storytelling practices in EFL learning environments.

This study considers how Indonesian folklore serves as a symbolic and pedagogical resource in EFL learning among Generation Z learners. This research considers the role of Indonesian folklore as a symbolic and pedagogical resource in EFL learning among Generation Z learners. The research tackles the following questions: (1) how learners interpret moral and religious values embedded in folklore; (2) which symbolic components represent these values; (3) how meaning is constructed through classroom interaction and digital media; and (4) how folklore contributes to both language development and moral awareness. Through addressing these questions, the study intends to advance culturally responsive EFL pedagogy that integrates local wisdom with global competencies, thereby fostering language competence alongside moral and intercultural understanding in the 21st century.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Generation Z and Symbolic Reinterpretation of Folklore**

Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2015, is widely recognized as a cohort of digital natives with extensive exposure to global media and transnational cultural flows (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Smith & Mark, 2001). Unlike previous generations, their engagement with cultural narratives, including folklore, primarily occurs through digital platforms such as videos, animations, social media, and interactive storytelling (Ajabshir, 2024; Chen Hsieh & Lee, 2023; Ramezanzadeh & Ebadi, 2025). This generational shift transforms the experience of traditional narratives: folklore is now subject to active interpretation, critique, and contextualization in relation to contemporary cultural norms, personal values, and ethical reasoning (Peng et al., 2024; Seftika et al., 2025). Empirical studies indicate that Generation Z learners approach folklore with an emphasis on rationality, gender equality, and agency, often challenging hierarchical or sacred interpretations found in traditional stories (Chen Hsieh & Lee, 2023; Teng, 2022). Digital storytelling facilitates this process by enabling learners to reconstruct narratives and assign meaning to symbolic elements such as characters, objects, and plot events, which convey social, moral, and cultural values (Hellystia & Hermawati, 2024; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2022). Consequently, folklore functions not only as a

cultural artifact but also as a dynamic semiotic system through which Generation Z negotiates and interprets symbolic meanings.

## **2.2 Symbolic Meaning and Local Wisdom in Indonesian Folklore**

Indonesian folklore serves as a repository of symbolic and moral knowledge. It reflects local values, norms, and spiritual beliefs (Danandjaja, 1995). Legends, myths, and oral narratives encode moral lessons, communal ethics, and distinct worldviews, using symbolism to represent virtues like patience, honesty, courage, and loyalty (Irlina & Djamalie, 2024; Widodo, 2016). Symbolic elements, including heroic acts, moral dilemmas, or magical objects, mediate interpretation and help audiences discern values without direct instruction (Blummer, 1969; GH, 1934). Indonesian learners interpret these symbols, connecting events and characters to local wisdom and ethics (Hellystia & Hermawati, 2024; Setyorini et al., 2024). Studies indicate that folklore is dynamic and continually reinterpreted as learners negotiate meaning in social and digital contexts (Chen Hsieh & Lee, 2023; Peng et al., 2024).

## **2.3 Generation Z Perspectives on Folklore**

Generation Z's engagement with folklore reflects a shift from passive reception to reflective participation. Learners interpret narratives through personal, cultural, and ethical perspectives, often relating symbolic content to contemporary issues such as leadership, resilience, and social justice (Al-Obaydi et al., 2024; Ramezanzadeh & Ebadi, 2025). Digital media enables collaborative engagement, remixing of story elements, and peer discussion throughout this process (Seftika et al., 2025; Teng, 2022). Research indicates that Generation Z learners are sensitive to cultural context and nuances, leading them to reinterpret gender roles, analyze moral conflicts, and evaluate character decisions in accordance with contemporary ethical standards (Hellystia & Hermawati, 2024; Liang & Hwang, 2023). These findings suggest Generation Z acts as active co-creators of meaning, reconstructing symbolic representations to fit their lived experiences.

## **2.4 Folklore Reinterpretation: The Concluding Perspective**

The reinterpretation of folklore emerges at the intersection of symbolism, local wisdom, and generational perspectives. Indonesian legends such as Princess Mayangsari (Banjar) and Princess Tadampalik (Bugis) illustrate symbolic representation and moral dilemmas. Symbolic elements—character virtues, narrative conflicts, and plot resolutions—shape ethical reasoning and cultural reflection (Hellystia & Hermawati, 2024; Irlina & Djamalie, 2024).

By emphasizing symbolic interpretation rather than prescriptive educational outcomes, this study positions folklore as a literary and cultural lens through which Generation Z engages with ethical and moral concepts. This approach provides a conceptual and empirical foundation for analyzing how local narratives convey cultural ethics and symbolic meaning in contemporary contexts. Based on the literature review, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How are symbolic meanings and local values represented in the legends of Princess Mayangsari (Banjar) and Princess Tadampalik (Bugis)?
2. How do Generation Z learners perceive and interpret these symbolic meanings within contemporary cultural and digital contexts?

The first question investigates the textual and narrative structure of the folklore. It pays particular attention to symbolic elements and embedded cultural values. The second question analyzes how Generation Z learners interpret these symbols. It highlights their negotiation of meaning within contemporary, digital, and multicultural contexts (Chen Hsieh & Lee, 2023; Hellystia & Hermawati, 2024; Peng et al., 2024).

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

A qualitative-interpretive approach, grounded in Sociolinguistics and Ethnolinguistics, was adopted to highlight how language, culture, and meaning interrelate. This methodology integrates content analysis of folklore texts with in-depth interviews of Generation Z participants to investigate the representation of symbolic meanings and local values in Indonesian legends, as well as contemporary youth interpretations (Blummer, 1969; GH, 1934).

The study focuses on two culturally significant legends: Princess Mayangsari (Banjar, South Kalimantan) and Princess Tadampalik (Bugis, South Sulawesi). These narratives were selected for their rich symbolic content, embedded moral dilemmas, and cultural relevance. The qualitative-interpretive design enables the identification of implicit cultural and moral meanings rather than assessing language-learning outcomes. Content analysis systematically identifies key symbolic elements, while interviews provide insights into Generation Z's interpretations of these symbols within contemporary digital contexts.

#### **3.2 Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to select 20 Generation Z participants aged 18–23. They met three criteria: (1) Banjarese or Buginese family background with exposure to local folklore, (2) familiarity with the legends of Princess Mayangsari or Princess Tadampalik, and (3) active engagement with digital media for cultural or educational purposes.

The participant group consisted of 11 females and 9 males from senior high schools and universities in South Kalimantan. This demographic is at a formative stage of identity and ethical development, providing culturally informed perspectives on folklore. Including Banjar and Bugis backgrounds incorporates multiple cultural viewpoints and nuanced insights into intergenerational understandings of local narratives (Prensky, 2001; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

#### **3.3 Instruments**

Two instruments were used. The content analysis framework—which is a systematic process of examining folklore texts to identify recurring patterns, themes, and symbols—was guided by symbolic Interactionism (Blummer, 1969; GH, 1934), and value theory (Al-Attas, 1991; Scheler, 1973; Spranger & Pigors, 1928). This framework identified symbolic elements such as Sacred Sword, Mirror of Self, White Buffalo, and Heirloom Kris, as well as moral or Islamic values including patience, trustworthiness, self-purification, and reconciliation. Reliability was established through pilot testing with two experts in folklore and sociolinguistics. The semi-structured interview guide explored participants' perceptions of symbolic elements, ethical lessons, and the relevance of values in contemporary life. These are interviews using a flexible set of questions that allow participants to share detailed responses while ensuring

comparable data. Questions were validated through expert review and pilot interviews with three participants.

Data collection included content analysis. The legends were analysed for narrative units, dialogues, and symbolic representations. Symbols and moral themes were categorized and cross-referenced with Islamic and local cultural values. The legends were analysed for narrative units, dialogues, and symbolic representations. Symbols and moral themes were categorized and cross-referenced with Islamic and local cultural values. All 20 participants were interviewed in person or via video conferencing, with each session lasting 45–60 minutes. The interviews explored interpretations of symbols, connections to personal and cultural experiences, and the perceived relevance of values in contemporary contexts. Triangulation with researcher memos enhanced credibility and minimized bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **3.4 Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis followed a structured, theory-guided procedure. Content analysis matrices identified recurring symbolic motifs, such as the Sacred Sword, which signifies courage or justice, and the White Buffalo, which represents spiritual guidance or resilience. Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo to extract themes related to symbolic meaning, local wisdom, and ethical reflection. Symbolic Interactionism guided the interpretation of social meaning construction, while Value Theory was used to categorize ethical and spiritual dimensions. Analytical reliability was ensured through peer debriefing and member checking.

This research is grounded in Symbolic Interactionism, which explains how meaning arises through social interaction and shared interpretation of symbols (Blummer, 1969; GH, 1934). Value Theory provides a framework for categorizing symbolic actions into moral, social, and spiritual dimensions (Al-Attas, 1991; Scheler, 1973; Spranger & Pigors, 1928). Together, these theories provide a systematic, replicable foundation. Overall, the methodology positions the research as ethnolinguistic, culturally grounded, and interpretive, focusing on how traditional narratives convey symbolic meanings and ethical values rather than on language-learning outcomes. This approach clarifies how Generation Z perceives, interprets, and derives meaning from folklore in both contemporary and digital contexts.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Local values, symbolic meanings and Islamic educational values represented in the legends of Princess Mayangsari and Princess Tadampalik**

The analysis shows that the legend of Princess Mayangsari conveys moral ideals such as loyalty, purity, and social responsibility. It uses symbolic representations to convey these values. These symbols act as culturally mediated signs that construct meaning, in line with Symbolic Interactionism (Blummer, 1969; GH, 1934). A central symbol is the Sacred Sword (Pedang Sakti Bumi Langit). Initially depicted as an object of power, its meaning evolves through the protagonist's actions. Mayangsari's decision to use the sword for protection and balance, rather than vengeance, signifies a transition from material power to moral responsibility. Within Value Theory, this symbol embodies spiritual and ethical values, specifically *amanah* (trust) and *jihad an-nafs*. Additional symbols, including the Mirror and the Sky Chalice, signify self-reflection and inner purification. These correspond to *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), indicating that the protagonist's journey encompasses both physical

and spiritual dimensions. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, meaning emerges through the character's engagement with these objects, establishing them as symbols of moral introspection rather than mere narrative devices. narrative devices.

The findings further indicate that Mayangsari's transformation from royal figure to moral guardian aligns with the Sufi concept of spiritual awakening. This transformation is conveyed through symbolic actions, underscoring folklore's function as an indirect medium for ethical transmission.

The legend of Princess Tadampalik also conveys moral values, especially courage, sacrifice, and the Bugis principle of *siri* (honor and dignity). The analysis shows that symbolic meaning is linked to both local culture and broader Islamic values. A key symbol is the White Buffalo (Tedong Buleng), which mediates healing and transformation. It signifies divine mercy and purification, corresponding to *rahmah* (compassion) and *sabr* (patience). Participants frequently associated this symbol with spiritual intervention and moral testing, indicating that its meaning is shaped by cultural and religious understanding.

The ocean is a central motif, symbolizing uncertainty and destiny. It relates to *tawakkal* (trust in divine will) and acceptance of fate. Symbolic Interactionism shows participants see the ocean as symbolizing life's unpredictability and spiritual surrender, as well as familial bonds and social responsibility. The Sacred Kris is also a key symbol, linked to family and social duty. It represents values such as *silaturrahim* (maintaining relationships) and *birrul walidain* (filial piety), illustrating how local objects gain cultural and religious meaning. Table 1 summarizes the main symbolic correspondences found in the content analysis.

**Table 1.** Symbolic Representation and Islamic Value Correspondence in the Legends

Symbol / Motif	Putri Mayangsari (Banjar)	Putri Tadampalik (Bugis)	Islamic Correlation
Sword / Weapon	Represents purification, moral responsibility, and the pursuit of truth	Represents protection, honor, and justice	<i>Amanah</i> (trust), <i>Jihad an-nafs</i> (self-restraint)
Light / Purity	Symbolizes enlightenment, compassion, and spiritual clarity	Represents inner faith and divine guidance	<i>Nur Ilahi</i> (divine light), <i>Taqwa</i> (piety)
Journey / Pilgrimage	Reflects spiritual transformation through trials	Represents devotion and surrender to destiny	<i>Hijrah</i> (transformation), <i>Tawakkal</i> (trust in God)
Water / Nature	Symbolizes renewal and harmony with creation	Represents divine will, patience, and life's flow	<i>Rahmah</i> (mercy), <i>Sabr</i> (patience)

In both narratives, symbols such as weapons, light, journeys, and natural elements mediate the relationship between individual actions and moral values. The sword in Mayangsari's story and the kris in Tadampalik's narrative both symbolize responsibility and justice, aligning with the concept of *amanah*. Journey motifs in both legends reflect transformation processes associated with *hijrah* and *ta*. The findings support the view that meaning is constructed through interaction, both within the narrative and by contemporary audiences, rather than being inherent in the symbols themselves. Value Theory categorizes these meanings into

spiritual, social, and moral dimensions, emphasizing the layered nature of symbolic interpretation.

Narrative Structure Structural analysis shows that both legends follow a narrative pattern: orientation, conflict, climax, and resolution. This structure facilitates moral transformation, beyond plot advancement. In Mayangsari's story, the climax is self-sacrifice, resolving moral conflict through spiritual purification; Tadampalik's climax involves healing and reconciliation, emphasizing communal harmony and restoration. This pattern reflects what participants called a "journey of moral testing," where the protagonist's trials lead to ethical and spiritual growth. These findings align with Symbolic Interactionism, as meaning is constructed through the progression of events and the protagonist's responses to symbolic challenges.

**Table 2.** Narrative Structure and Conflict in the Legends of Princess Mayangsari and Princess Tadampalik

Narrative Element	Princess Mayangsari (Banjar)	Princess Tadampalik (Bugis)
Orientation	Depicts a peaceful life in the Cempaka Wangi Kingdom	Introduces the Kingdom of Luwu and Tadampalik's beauty
Initial Conflict	Emergence of darkness and loss of the sacred sword	Conflict between customary law and a royal marriage proposal
Climax	Self-sacrifice to redeem ancestral wrongdoing	Healing through the miraculous intervention of the white buffalo
Resolution	Restoration of spiritual balance and harmony with nature	Reconciliation of families and peaceful inter-kingdom union

The findings indicate that both legends encode Islamic values through culturally specific symbols, illustrating cultural integration rather than replacement. Values such as *tauhid* (faith), *akhlaq* (morality), *amanah* (trust), *sabr* (patience), and *rahmah* (compassion) are embedded in symbolic actions and narrative outcomes, rather than being stated explicitly. Participant responses indicate that these values are interpreted differently depending on personal and cultural perspectives. This supports the view that folklore constitutes a dynamic interpretive space in which meaning is negotiated rather than fixed.

**Table 3.** Key Symbolic Elements and Their Interpretive Meanings

Legend	Symbolic Element	Interpretive Meaning	Associated Islamic Value
Princess Mayangsari	Sacred Sword (Pedang Sakti Bumi Langit)	Moral responsibility and ethical use of power	<i>Amanah</i> (trust)
Princess Mayangsari	Mirror and Celestial Cup	Self-reflection and spiritual purification	<i>Tazkiyatun nafs</i> (purification of the soul)
Princess Tadampalik	White Buffalo (Tedong Buleng)	Divine mercy and miraculous healing	<i>Rahmah</i> (compassion), <i>Sabr</i> (patience)
Princess Tadampalik	Sacred Kris (Dagger)	Familial bonds and social responsibility	<i>Silaturahmi</i> (kinship), <i>Birrul walidain</i> (filial piety)

Both legends present female protagonists as moral and spiritual agents. Rather than treating this as a general narrative feature, the analysis indicates that participants regard these characters as examples of ethical leadership grounded in compassion and wisdom. Mayangsari is frequently associated with reformative leadership, while Tadampalik is linked to teaching and moral guidance. These interpretations align with broader Islamic values such

as *rahmah* (compassion) and *hikmah* (wisdom), suggesting that gender roles in these narratives are constructed through symbolic action rather than predefined hierarchy.

**Table 4.** Core Islamic Educational Values Identified in the Legends

Value Category	Description in Mayangsari	Description in Tadampalik
Faith ( <i>Tauhid</i> )	Emphasizes reliance on divine will over worldly power	Highlights submission to divine destiny
Morality ( <i>Akhlaq</i> )	Demonstrates self-restraint and ethical leadership	Reflects humility and moral integrity
Trust ( <i>Amanah</i> )	Rejects misuse of power; leads with justice and compassion	Upholds dignity and responsibility
Patience ( <i>Sabr</i> ) & Trust ( <i>Tawakkal</i> )	Endures trials with inner discipline	Accepts exile and fate with sincerity
Purification ( <i>Tazkiyatun Nafs</i> )	Achieved through reflection and sacrifice	Implied through suffering and healing
Brotherhood ( <i>Ukhuwah</i> ) & Compassion ( <i>Rahmah</i> )	Restores harmony between humans and nature	Emphasizes reconciliation and empathy

#### 4.2. Generation Z's Perception, Interpretation of Local Folklore Cultural and Gender Interpretation

Interview data indicate Generation Z engages with the legends of Princess Mayangsari and Princess Tadampalik as sources of cultural identity, ethical reflection, and contemporary relevance. Thematic analysis revealed five principal themes: cultural identity, gender reinterpretation, moral symbolism, digital transformation, and spiritual integration.

##### 4.2.1. Cultural Identity and Collective Belonging

A strong sense of cultural pride and identity was evident in 18 of 20 participants. This underscores its central role. Respondents consistently reported that the legends affirm the cultural richness of Banjar and Bugis traditions.

One participant stated:

*"I'm proud because Banjar also has great stories, not only in other regions. These stories teach us morals for life."*

Another participant similarly noted:

*"These stories make me realize our culture holds significance equal to others in Indonesia."*

These responses suggest that folklore functions as a symbolic resource for identity construction. In line with George Herbert Mead's concept of the *generalized other*, participants develop their sense of self through shared cultural narratives. This reinforcement builds collective belonging.

##### 4.2.2. Gender Reinterpretation and Empowerment

Seventeen of the twenty participants discussed the reinterpretation of gender roles, establishing it as a prominent theme. Participants consistently described the princess figures as symbols of courage, agency, and leadership.

For example:

*"Women today exhibit bravery like Princess Mayangsari—we also move beyond our comfort zones."*

Another participant emphasized:

*"To be a good leader, you don't have to be a man; what matters is competence."*

These responses reflect a shift from traditional conceptions of femininity to contemporary interpretations of empowerment and equality. According to Blumer, this shows how symbolic meanings are reconstructed through social interaction.

Six participants expressed emotional ambivalence. They admired the princesses but also acknowledged the challenges in embodying such roles. One participant reflected:

*"I am proud of both Princesses, but I cannot imagine being in their position..."*

This finding suggests that interpretation is both cognitive and emotional. It shows a deeper level of engagement with the narrative.

4.2.3. Moral Symbolism and Ethical Reflection. Nineteen of the twenty participants identified moral symbolism, making it the most prominent theme. Participants actively interpreted narrative elements as representations of ethical values relevant to contemporary life.

Key symbolic reinterpretations include:

- Sacred Sword: responsibility and ethical leadership (16 participants)
- White Buffalo: compassion and healing (15 participants)
- Illness and exile: resilience and personal growth (14 participants)

One participant stated:

*"Historically, women were expected to accept their fate. Now, we have the ability to redefine our destinies."*

These findings indicate participants reinterpret symbolic meanings to align with contemporary ethical frameworks. This supports the symbolic interactionist perspective. Meaning is socially constructed, rather than fixed.

#### 4.2.4. Digital Transformation of Folklore

Seventeen of the twenty participants discussed the transformation of folklore into digital media. Respondents emphasized the importance of adapting traditional stories into contemporary formats, including animation, video content, and games.

For example:

*"If it's made into an animation, people will be interested to watch."*

Animation can make the story alive and fun, not boring. These responses indicate that Generation Z perceives folklore as a dynamic and adaptable cultural resource. Digital platforms function as new spaces for symbolic interaction, where meaning is reconstructed through visual and interactive forms. Drawing on George Herbert Mead's concept of the *significant symbol*, digital media may be understood as a contemporary symbolic system that transmits and transforms cultural meaning.

4.2.5. Spiritual Aspects

Sixteen of the twenty participants discussed the integration of Islamic and local cultural values. Participants emphasized that the legends reflect harmony between religious beliefs and traditional practices.

One participant explained: “*There is no conflict between religion and culture.*”

This finding indicates that symbolic elements are interpreted within a shared cultural and spiritual framework. According to Blumer, meaning persists through social consensus, whereby collective agreement reinforces cultural values. This convergence aligns with Blumer’s perspective on meaning as social consensus. The legend’s moral essence persists because its values are collectively affirmed and reinterpreted through shared cultural understanding. Thus, folklore in the digital era serves as a symbolic interface: connecting spirituality, morality, and cultural identity in new, dynamic forms of social interaction. The interviews revealed three major themes in Gen Z’s perception:

**Table 5.** Integrative Interpretation

Analytical Focus	Theoretical Link (Mead & Blumer)	Empirical Reflection from Data
Cultural identity	<i>Generalized other</i> (Mead)	Gen Z expresses pride and belonging through cultural symbols.
Gender empowerment	<i>Role-taking and Self</i> (Mead)	Female figures are reinterpreted as agents of strength and leadership.
Moral symbolism	<i>Meaning as a social product</i> (Blumer)	Symbols like sword, sea, and light gain moral reinterpretation.
Digital transformation	<i>Symbolic interaction in new media</i>	Folklore becomes an interactive platform for cultural continuity.
Spiritual harmony	<i>Social consensus of meaning</i>	Islamic and local values integrate through shared symbolic understanding.

These findings demonstrate that the legends of Princess Mayangsari and Princess Tadampalik function not only as cultural heritage but also as meaningful literary texts that support interpretation, reflection, and value negotiation among Generation Z learners. Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, the symbolic elements embedded in both legends such as the sacred sword, mirror of self, white buffalo, and heirloom kris are shown to acquire meaning through social interaction and contemporary reinterpretation rather than through fixed traditional authority.

**5. Discussion**

This study demonstrates that folklore operates as a symbolic system through which moral values are constructed and interpreted, thereby supporting Blumer’s premise that meaning emerges from social interaction rather than inhering in objects. Analysis of key symbols, such as the Sacred Sword and the Mirror, indicates that ethical concepts, such as responsibility and self-reflection, are dynamically negotiated by contemporary audiences. This finding aligns with Clifford Geertz’s view of cultural symbols as “models of reality” that both reflect and shape moral understanding.

Consistent with previous research on folklore as a medium for moral education (Lickona, 1992; Nurgiyantoro, 2010), this study reaffirms that narratives encode ethical values through

symbolic representation. Building on James Danandjaja's emphasis on the pedagogical function of Indonesian folklore in conveying communal norms, this study moves the discussion forward by demonstrating that these values are actively reconstructed through interpretive engagement. In doing so, it highlights a shift from transmission-based to interaction-based models of meaning-making.

The findings indicate that Generation Z actively reinterprets traditional symbols, supporting Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which posits that meaning is culturally produced rather than passively inherited. The transformation of traditional gender roles into narratives emphasizing agency and leadership exemplifies how symbolic meanings are recontextualized within contemporary socio-cultural frameworks. This process aligns with Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, where meaning is negotiated at the intersection of tradition and modernity. While prior studies (Liang & Hwang, 2023; Teng, 2022) have identified a tendency among Generation Z to reinterpret folklore from perspectives of equality and agency, the present study contributes by providing empirical evidence of the mechanisms underlying such reinterpretation, particularly through engagement with symbolic elements embedded in narrative structures. This approach shifts the analytical focus from the outcomes of reinterpretation to the processes of symbolic negotiation. The role of folklore in identity construction, as observed in this study, supports George Herbert Mead's concept of the *generalized other*, in which identity is formed through shared symbolic systems. Folklore serves as a cultural framework that enables individuals to situate themselves within collective social meanings.

Together, these findings align with Bonny Norton's theory that identity is central to language learning engagement, as well as with earlier research in intercultural communication (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 2002), which emphasizes the importance of integrating cultural content into language education. Building on these perspectives, this study extends this body of work by demonstrating that folklore facilitates not only cultural awareness but also affective engagement and identity affirmation, particularly among Generation Z. These results suggest that identity construction in contemporary contexts involves both recognition and reinterpretation of cultural narratives.

In terms of pedagogy, the findings corroborate existing research on narrative-based and project-based learning, particularly studies by Beckett & Slater (2021) and Thomas (2020), which emphasize the importance of collaborative and inquiry-based approaches for enhancing language proficiency and critical thinking. Similarly, research on digital storytelling (Bronner, 2018; Huang et al., 2026) demonstrates its effectiveness in fostering learner engagement and multimodal literacy.

Extending these pedagogical perspectives, this study demonstrates that folklore-based digital adaptation serves both pedagogical and cultural functions. Learners use language not only to reproduce narratives but also to actively reinterpret and reconstruct them within digital environments. This finding aligns with Byram's framework of intercultural communicative competence and suggests the development of symbolic competence, where learners negotiate meaning across cultural and linguistic boundaries. As a result, folklore is positioned as a resource that integrates language learning with cultural interpretation and creative production.

The integration of Islamic values into local folklore, as observed in this study, supports previous findings on the compatibility of religious and cultural frameworks in Indonesian narratives (Danandjaja, 1995; Widodo, 2016). This study advances this research by demonstrating that these values are not static but are continually reinterpreted within contemporary ethical contexts. This dynamic process is consistent with Blumer's emphasis on meaning as a product of ongoing social interaction. Spiritual values such as patience, sincerity, and trust are sustained not through rigid transmission but through their adaptability to evolving social realities. This finding highlights the role of folklore as a mediating space between tradition and modernity, where cultural and religious meanings are negotiated and renewed. The findings indicate that folklore functions not as a static repository of cultural knowledge but as a dynamic site of symbolic negotiation, where meaning is continuously reconstructed through the interaction of tradition and contemporary perspectives. By integrating symbolic interpretation with generational and pedagogical dimensions, this study demonstrates the enduring relevance of folklore in mediating identity, values, and intercultural understanding within modern learning contexts.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study concludes that the legends of Princess Mayangsari and Princess Tadampalik remain culturally and pedagogically relevant in contemporary education, particularly within English as a Foreign Language context. Through the integration of Symbolic Interactionism and Value Theory, the research reveals that folklore functions as a living literary text whose meanings are continually reconstructed by Generation Z learners in response to modern cultural, digital, and ethical realities. Rather than perceiving folklore as sacred narratives confined to the past, Generation Z engages with these legends as reflective resources that support identity negotiation, moral reasoning, and creative expression. Their reinterpretation emphasizes values such as resilience, leadership, equality, and spiritual integrity, demonstrating that local wisdom and Islamic ethical principles can coexist with modern educational perspectives when conveyed through symbolic and narrative forms. From an EFL perspective, this study highlights the potential of local folklore as an authentic learning resource that enhances narrative literacy, intercultural competence, and character education. When incorporated into language learning through interpretative discussion, critical analysis, and digital storytelling, folklore supports both linguistic development and ethical awareness without reducing literary texts to moral prescriptions. Ultimately, this research affirms that integrating local legends into EFL education contributes to sustaining cultural identity while equipping learners with the communicative and critical skills required in a globalized world. Folklore, therefore, should be positioned not merely as cultural preservation but as a strategic pedagogical resource that bridges language learning, cultural literacy, and moral education for Generation Z.

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