



## Exploring Brunei's Oral Traditions: A Review of *Cerita Lisan Brunei*

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### Abstract

This article reviews *Cerita Lisan Brunei*, a compilation of 50 folklore stories from Brunei Darussalam's four districts: Brunei-Muara, Belait, Tutong, and Temburong. Produced by Universiti Brunei Darussalam students in the early 1990s, the book represents a significant effort to preserve Brunei's oral heritage amidst evolving socio-cultural dynamics. This review uses qualitative descriptive analysis to examine the folklore types featured in the book – myths, legends, fables, and allegories – and evaluates its strengths and weaknesses. The book effectively highlights Brunei's cultural and historical legacy thus making it suitable for teaching and learning materials. It also contributes meaningfully to preserving Brunei's unwritten oral traditions. However, the absence of original language transcriptions and limited contextual notes for historical and fictional stories need improvement. Adding these elements would enhance the book's historical accuracy and reader comprehension. Despite these shortcomings, *Cerita Lisan Brunei* remains a valuable resource for readers of all levels, from primary to university. It would serve as an essential platform for preserving and sharing Brunei's oral folklore tradition.

**Keywords:** Brunei oral traditions; Southeast Asian folklore; Cultural heritage; Malay Literature

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## INTRODUCTION

Folklore is a complex concept that includes the traditional beliefs, customs, narratives, and practices of a society, passed down orally from one generation to the next. It acts as a record of cultural identity and collective memory, embodying the values, norms, and experiences of a community. According to Sufa (2023), folklore represents a collection of stories and beliefs transmitted across generations, highlighting the crucial role of oral tradition in preserving cultural heritage. Beyond mere storytelling, this oral tradition serves as an essential tool for communities to express their identities and recount their histories (Eslit, 2023)

In cultural studies, folklore is widely recognized as an essential means of preserving the unique traditions, beliefs, and narratives of a society. Folklore,

transmitted orally across generations, embodies the "autobiography" of a culture, as it reflects the values, history, and identity of a community (Dundes & Bronner, 2007). By recording these stories, folklore becomes a record to sustain cultural heritage that might extinct due to socio cultural change. In Brunei, folklore holds a significant place, symbolizing not only the country's past but also a continuing narrative of its people's values and experiences.

The book *Cerita Lisan Brunei* (Brunei Oral Stories) by (Jukim et al., 2024) embraces this concept by preserving 50 traditional Brunei stories from the four districts of Brunei Darussalam. This collection is a step to enhance Brunei's cultural identity, serving both as an educational tool and a link between generations. According to (Barli et al., 2024) folklore has a universal function as an entertainment medium that could be used in teaching and learning activities. The production of *Cerita Lisan Brunei* is a remarkable project undertaken by undergraduate students from the Malay Literature Programme at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD). Under the guidance of editor Jukin and co-editors Tinkong, Tengah, Ariff, and Wasli, the students in UBD collaborated to ensure that Brunei's folklore would be accessible to current and future generations.

According to the book's foreword by Dr. Daud, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at UBD, *Cerita Lisan Brunei* is a proactive effort to sustain Brunei's cultural heritage and contributes to the country's Vision 2035, which aims to foster a highly educated and skilled people. Furthermore, this book aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), which emphasizes protecting the world's cultural and natural heritage. The editors' hope is that this publication will contribute to Brunei's heritage, while also supporting global goals to make cultural heritage sustainable.

Efforts to document Brunei's folklore heritage actually date back to the 1970s, led by local figures such as Mr. Dulani, who recorded and published significant traditional narratives. In 1972, Dulani documented Hikayat Awang Si Ambok (Awang Si Ambok Saga), a story originally told in 1902, followed by Hikayat Awang Kamaruddin (1992), which recounts the epic of a Kedayan warrior. These early efforts highlight the value of recording Brunei's oral traditions, emphasizing the cultural significance of safeguarding stories passed down through generations. Other local scholars, like Bantong in 1980s, contributed by documenting folklore from the Dusun ethnic group in the Brunei Museum Journal, focusing on preserving stories from Tutong District that provide insights into Dusun customs and beliefs (Yusof, 2021). Likewise, Suhaili and Setia's *Koleksi Cerita Sang Jati Siri 1* (2005) reflects local efforts to preserve the Dusun language and culture, presenting a diverse mix of origin tales, ghost stories, and humorous anecdotes. Foreign scholars have also contributed to the documentation and preservation of Brunei's folklore. Kershaw's *Dusun Folktales* (1994) collected 88 Dusun stories, preserving them when oral storytelling was diminishing as Brunei radio and television stations were established (Yusof & Alas, 2021b).

These efforts show the importance of collaboration across local and international scholars to sustain Brunei's oral traditions, ensuring that these narratives endure as

part of the nation's cultural heritage. Through *Cerita Lisan Brunei* book, Brunei's folklore moves from what was once an oral tradition into an accessible collection for Bruneians to ensure its sustainability. In this review, we will further analyze the types of folklore presented in *Cerita Lisan Brunei*, while evaluating the book's strengths and weaknesses.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing content analysis to examine the folklore within *Cerita Lisan Brunei*. The analysis focuses on key elements, such as types of folklore, characters, and extreme storylines, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the book's content. Stories are analyzed and categorized based on established folklore classifications, including myths, legends, fables, and allegories, while characters are examined for their roles, traits, and cultural significance. Extreme storylines are identified by their symbolic or dramatic impact within the narratives.

This structured framework ensures a systematic and transparent evaluation. Furthermore, the study evaluates the book's strengths and weaknesses, highlighting its educational value and identifying areas for improvement, such as the inclusion of original language translations and contextual notes. The findings conclude with recommendations to enhance future folklore documentation and support the preservation of Brunei's cultural heritage.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will highlight the number of stories from each district, followed by a review of each section of the book. The *Cerita Lisan Brunei* book successfully compiled 50 unique folklore stories from across Brunei Darussalam's four districts – Brunei-Muara, Belait, Tutong, and Temburong. Despite its modest size of 5,765 square kilometers, Brunei is a nation rich in history, with distinct linguistic and cultural diversity that is vividly captured in this collection (Yusof & Mahali, 2019). The stories in *Cerita Lisan Brunei* reflect each district's unique heritage, offering insight into the values, beliefs, and traditions of the old days. This book stands as evident to Brunei's rich cultural tapestry, preserving the oral traditions that highlight the nation's historical depth and diversity.

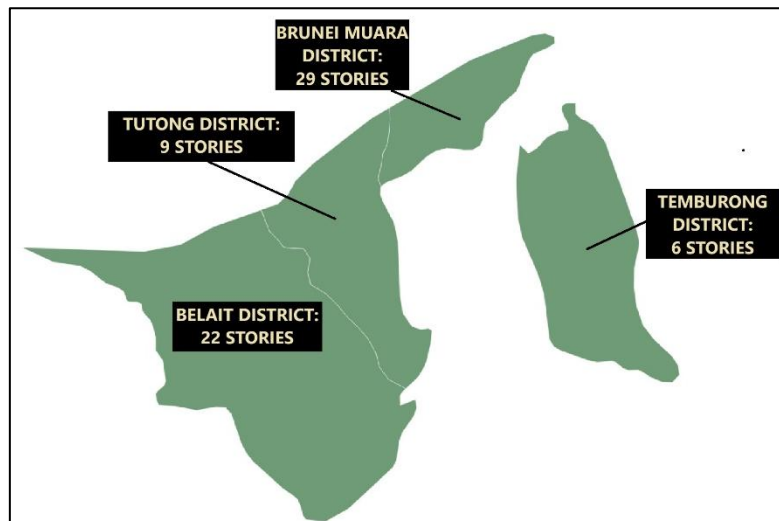


Figure 1: Map of Brunei

No.	District	Number of Folklore Stories Compiled	Population Density (According to the Brunei Department of Economic Planning and Statistics)
1	Brunei-Muara	29	70% +
2	Belait	22	14% +
3	Tutong	9	10% +
4	Temburong	6	2% +

Figure 2: Number of Stories According to District

According to the data in Figures 1 and 2, the number of folklore stories compiled from the four districts in Brunei shows notable variations. Brunei-Muara leads with the highest number, totaling 29 stories, followed by Belait with 22. In contrast, Tutong and Temburong have fewer stories, with 9 and 6, respectively. This variation may be attributed to factors such as population density and accessibility. Brunei-Muara, as the main urban center, has the highest population (over 70% of Brunei's total), providing more resources for cultural documentation and easier access for researchers. Belait, with a population density of around 14-15%, also yielded a relatively high number of stories. Tutong and Temburong, with population densities of approximately 10% and 2%, respectively, have fewer stories compiled. Notably, Temburong's low count may also reflect its limited accessibility in the 1990s, as it was only reachable by boat or via a longer route through Limbang, Malaysia, contributing to its smaller folklore archive.

### Section1: Stories from Brunei-Muara District

The review of *Cerita Lisan Brunei* begins with an examination of Section 1, which features 29 stories from the Brunei-Muara district. This section contains a variety of folklore genres, including myths, legends, allegories, trickster tales, and fables in 150 pages. The shortest story, 'Burong Tiong Bercukur' (Shaved Gracula Bird), is just one page long, while the longest, 'Bilai Amas' story which has nine pages story. All stories in this section were collected in 1990, with the

exception of 'Perigis dengan Hantu' (Perigis with Ghost) story, which dates back to the 1970s. The storytellers, both male and female, range from 35 to 80 years of age, contributing a broad perspective to the compiled tales.

The myths within this section are particularly prominent and frequently feature royalty, curses, and mystical mantras. For instance, in the story Labai Malang, a character afflicted with scabies, boils, and rashes is taught a healing mantra in his dream.

*"apabila engkau mandi, bacalah 'eh kuris, haram engkau makan daging Labai Malang, seperti kau makan daging junjungan, begitu juga tawar bisul dan miring..."* [when you are about to take a shower, read this 'eh scabies, you are forbidden to eat Labai Malang's meat, just as you eat nobleman's meat, so do boils and rashes..]" (Jukim et al., 2024:97).

This reflects the traditional belief in spoken incantations as a remedy for ailments, underscoring the mystical elements that pervade Brunei's folklore. Additionally, Hindu influences are evident in stories such as 'Laksamana dan Sayaman', where characters like Hanuman, a deity in Hindu mythology, appear. This indicates that traces of Hinduism persist in Brunei's folklore, even after the spread of Islam in the region. Traditional Malay poems, known as *pantun*, are also featured in the stories. An example is provided below:

*"Bagadis mengikat mata*

*Cermin tergantung pada ekor Hanuman*

*Habis segala Rata*

*Asal Membelai adinda tuan (2024: 80)*

Legends also play a significant role in the collection, particularly in origin stories such as 'Kampung Tempayan Pisang dan Kampung Limbungan' (Tempayan Pisang Village and Limbungan Village). These tales include historical elements, suggesting that Brunei's territory once extended as far as the Philippines, Kuching in Sarawak, and Lawas in Sabah. Such narratives illustrate Brunei's historical influence and power, painting a picture of the sultanate as a regional power that once collected tributes or taxes from neighboring areas.

The fables in this section primarily convey moral lessons. Stories like 'Kura-Kura Bertengkar dengan Tenggiling' (A Turtle Fights with A Pangolin) and 'Kucing hendak Berpadi Dengan Kawan-Kawannya' (Cat Wants to Plant Paddy with His Friends) teach values such as respect for others, mindfulness in sharing, and avoiding exploitation of one's friends. These tales use animal characters to impart ethical principles, reinforcing the didactic role of folklore in Brunei's cultural narrative.

Allegories and trickster tales add an element of humor, yet also depict dark themes and extreme behavior. In story of 'Si Alo'i', for example, a man irrationally follows an ant's movements to descend from a tree, leading to the



loss of his belongings. The story highlights the importance of thinking critically rather than imitating others. More extreme behavior appears in 'Si Paluian Dua Laki Bini', where a character accidentally slaughters and cooks his children, demonstrating the presence of dark elements within Brunei's folklore.

The characters across these stories are diverse. Myths feature royalty, peasants, genies, ghosts, and animals, while fables include cats, turtles, rats, and chickens. Allegories present foolish characters with fierce partners, blending humor with moral lessons. This diversity of characters across genres reflects Brunei's rich cultural landscape and the versatility of its oral storytelling tradition in conveying both ethical values and societal norms.

## Section2: Stories from Brunei Muara District

In Section 2, *Cerita Lisan Brunei* features nine folklore stories from the Tutong District, compiled into 65 pages. The shortest story in this section is 'Si Alo'i', with one page of story, while the longest is Tuan Puteri Bukit Dendang Pengayu, a 12-page narrative. All the stories were collected in 1990 from storytellers aged between 55 and 80, comprising a mix of male and female contributors. The section showcases a diverse range of folklore types, including myths, allegories, trickster tales, and fables, offering insight into the cultural and narrative traditions of the Tutong District.

The longest story in this section, 'Tuan Puteri Bukit Dendang Pengayu' (Princess of Bukit Dendang Pengayu), exemplifies the mythical genre. It combines multiple interconnected narratives, including a quest for a rare fruit called 'Tuntung Naratus', a war between siblings, and the descendants' journey to finding a princess. The story is richly detailed, featuring elements of combat, trickery, and magic, which keep the audience engaged. Its layered narrative structure reflects the complexity and richness of oral storytelling in Brunei, showcasing themes of family conflict, loyalty, and perseverance.

Trickster stories are also prominent in this section, with Abi Nawas serving as a standout example. This story has a resemblance to the tale of Abu Nawas found in *1001 Nights folklore*. In this tale, Abi Nawas cleverly avoids being thrown into the sea by tricking an Indian man into believing that his capture was due to his refusal to marry a princess. The Indian man, tempted by the prospect of marriage, volunteers to take Abi Nawas's place and is ultimately thrown into the sea instead. This story highlights the cleverness and quick wit of trickster characters. Additionally, the inclusion of Malay poetry in Abi Nawas enriches the narrative. An example is:

*Unju-unjul dai: mampalas,  
tamiang gasa-gasa,  
aja bantanjul lima balas  
kan ku tampas: inda ba:sa (2024:178)*

The fable 'Kura-Kura dan Ambuk' (Turtle and Monkey) demonstrates the moralistic and often humorous nature of this genre. The story portrays a conflict between the turtle and the monkey, where the monkey takes advantage of the turtle by eating all the bananas they agreed to share. Seeking revenge, the turtle tricks the monkey into sitting on a swing, then repeatedly pokes the monkey's anus with a thorn, resulting in the monkey's stomach bursting. This fable emphasizes themes of justice and retribution, albeit with a dark and exaggerated twist that aligns with the more extreme elements found in Brunei folklore.

The characters in these stories are diverse, including royal figures such as kings, queens, and princesses, as well as peasants, giants, turtles, and monkeys. Similar to the stories from Brunei-Muara, this section also features dark and extreme scenes. For example, in the story of 'Si Tatal', the protagonists kill a giant by throwing fruit into its anus, echoing the grotesque humor and violence seen in other Bruneian tales. Similarly, Kura-Kura dan Ambuk portrays a graphic revenge act, reinforcing the darker aspects of fables and folklore.

The stories in Section 2 highlight the narrative diversity of the oral tradition in Tutong District. Myths like 'Tuan Puteri Bukit Dendang Pengayu' emphasize grandeur and complexity, while trickster tales and fables, such as 'Abi Nawas' and 'Kura-Kura dan Ambuk', provide humor and moral lessons, albeit with elements of exaggerated violence. The variety of characters and themes reflects the richness of Brunei's folklore, while the inclusion of extreme and dark elements underscores the unique storytelling traditions that continue to captivate and educate.

### Section 3: Stories From Temburong District

Section 3 of *Cerita Lisan Brunei* focuses on folklore from the Temburong District, presenting a collection of six stories over 29 pages, making it the shortest section in the book. All stories in this section were recorded in 1990, narrated by a mix of male and female storytellers aged between 52 and 80. The shortest story, *Asal Usul Bukit Telungong* (The origin of Telungong Hill), with two pages of story, while the longest, *Celap Dapur* (Cold Kitchen), extends across eight pages. This section's folklore is limited to myths and legends, offering a concentrated glimpse into Temburong's traditional narratives.

The mythical stories in this section provide insights into Temburong's cultural beliefs and themes of justice and redemption. A prominent example is 'Asal Usul Raja Si Kudung' (The origins of King Si Kudung), which tells the story of a prince who loses his hands after being falsely accused of theft by malevolent noblemen. The prince ultimately finds redemption when he discovers a magical fruit called *Batil Batal*, which miraculously restores his hands. He returns to his palace to reclaim his rightful position, underscoring themes of resilience, justice, and the mystical elements common in Brunei's folklore.

Legends in this section explore historical figures and local geography, grounding the narratives in Brunei's past. For instance, *Asal Usul Ajung di*

Brunei dan Pulau Berbunut (The Origin of Ajung in Brunei and Berbunut Island) highlights the rivalry between Awang Alak Betatar, Brunei's first sultan, and his sibling, Awang Semaun. In a contest of skill, the two compete to see who can shoot a blowgun dart the furthest. Awang Alak Betatar's dart reaches Brunei land from Temburong, while Awang Semaun's dart only reaches Berbunut Island at Brunei's estuary. A hill in the area is said to have turned into a stone ship called Ajung, believed to mark the spot where Awang Semaun's dart landed. This legend reflects Temburong's historical connections to Brunei's heritage.

The characters in these folklore stories from Temburong include a mix of peasants, royal figures, and mythical beings, such as dragons. Historical figures like Awang Alak Betatar (Sultan Muhammad Shah, the first sultan of Brunei) and Awang Semaun bring a sense of authenticity and historical continuity to the legends, connecting the folklore to Brunei's heritage. Unlike other sections, Section 3 does not contain extreme or graphic elements, likely due to the smaller number of stories compared to those from other districts.

In summary, Section 3 provides a brief yet culturally rich collection of myths and legends from Temburong, showcasing themes of justice, skill, and connection to historical figures. The stories reflect Temburong's unique folklore, with a focus on resilience, competition, and the historical impact of Brunei's first sultan, while avoiding the darker elements.

#### **Section 4: Stories from Belait District.**

The final section of *Cerita Lisan Brunei* compiles 22 stories from the Belait District, spanning 70 pages. All the stories were recorded in 1990, with contributions from both male and female storytellers, though their ages were not documented. The shortest story, *Melaka membuka Sungai Mukah*, spans just one page, while the longest, *Malik Sulaiman and Si Alui*, each extend to five pages. This section focuses exclusively on legends, providing a rich tapestry of narratives that combine historical events with imaginative elements.

A significant portion of the section is dedicated to the story of Mujah, an Iban man whose tale unfolds over 17 of the 22 stories. Mujah, the son of Bungai Ringkai, is depicted as a formidable warrior and headhunter who controlled vast areas. His story chronicles his growth from infancy into a legendary Iban figure. The narratives weave in historical events, such as the attack by Raja Brooke, the White Rajah of Sarawak, on Mujah and his people. Despite the assault, Mujah successfully retreated inland, eluding capture. The stories further explore the origins of the Gawai festival, the founding of new villages, and extend into the era of Japanese occupation in Borneo. These interconnected tales highlight the blending of cultural identity, resistance, and survival within the Iban community.

Another notable legend in this section is *Puak Belait Tak Makan Payau* (The Belait Ethnic Doesn't Eat Deer Meat). This tale explains why the Belait ethnic group abstains from eating deer meat, rooted in a prophecy revealed through



a dream. According to the legend, consuming deer meat brings misfortune, such as attacks by crocodiles, infant mortality, or deadly diseases, lasting for seven generations. This narrative reflects the significance of cultural taboos and their role in shaping communal identity and practices.

The characters in this section are diverse, ranging from animals such as pigs, green lizards, and bees to the central figure of Mujah. Historical elements are also present, with references to Charles Brooke, the Rajah of Sarawak. These legends creatively blend factual history with imaginative storytelling, adding intrigue and depth to the narratives. The inclusion of real historical figures like Brooke highlights the storytellers' awareness of historical events, even as they incorporate fictionalized elements to enhance the tales' appeal. Overall, this section showcases the intersection of folklore, history, and cultural values, emphasizing the Belait District's unique contributions to Brunei's oral tradition.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of *Cerita Lisan Brunei* Book**

The book *Cerita Lisan Brunei* represents a commendable effort to preserve Brunei's unwritten folklore through collaboration between the government and higher education institutions. One of its greatest strengths lies in its role as a proactive measure to document stories that might otherwise cultural heritage would be lost in the face of changing socio-cultural dynamics. (Yusof, 2021). With oral storytelling traditions no longer widely practiced, the younger generation may be unfamiliar with these tales. As noted by oral literature serves as a guide and source of wisdom for contemporary life, making this collection invaluable in bridging generational, linguistic and cultural gaps (Yusof et al., 2023).

Another strength of the book is its potential as a resource for teaching and learning across various educational levels. The short and diverse stories, ranging from fables to legends, are suitable for students to read, discuss, and analyze. They also offer opportunities for creative projects such as dramatizations or other interactive activities, as suggested by (Yusof & Alas, 2021a). Moreover, the portrayal of Brunei's cultural and ritual heritage in the book underscores the nation's long and fascinating history, highlighting its rich traditions and reinforcing national identity.

However, the book also has notable weaknesses. While the use of standard Malay makes the stories accessible to a wider audience, the lack of original translations diminishes the authenticity of the narratives, particularly for local readers. Providing the original versions alongside the standard Malay translations could preserve the cultural nuances and expressions unique to Brunei's dialects. Using the original language and dialect could strengthen the local language within the community (Bryn Fabian et al., 2022; Shafa'atussara, 2020)

Additionally, some of the stories include references to historical events that blend fact with fiction. Without clear explanations or postscript notes, readers may struggle to discern the historical accuracy of the narratives, potentially leading to misunderstandings. Including brief annotations or contextual explanations for such stories would enhance the book's educational value and prevent confusion regarding

the distinction between fictional and factual elements. Incorporating original language translations and providing contextual notes for historical events would further enhance its authenticity and educational impact.

## CONCLUSION

The book *Cerita Lisan Brunei* represents a significant milestone in preserving Brunei's oral heritage. By compiling a diverse collection of 50 folklore stories from all four districts of Brunei Darussalam, the book bridges the generational gap, ensuring that traditional narratives remain accessible to modern audiences. This project, undertaken by students from Universiti Brunei Darussalam in the early 1990s, highlights the crucial role of academia in cultural preservation. The involvement of higher education institutions is essential not only for safeguarding cultural heritage but also for preserving local wisdom and linguistic diversity. (Dunis et al., 2024). The material produced through such efforts serves as a valuable teaching resource, helping to ensure that Brunei's rich cultural and historical legacy is maintained for future generations.

This initiative highlights the potential for community involvement in preserving oral traditions. While this project is a commendable effort, it could benefit from broader contributions. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local communities, and cultural enthusiasts could play an active role in future projects, making folklore preservation a collective effort. Such initiatives align with global goals like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly in preserving cultural heritage as part of community development. Additionally, digitizing folklore projects and making them available online would expand their reach, ensuring global accessibility (Mishra & Rani Samanta, 2022) and fostering a greater appreciation of Brunei's oral traditions.

## RECOMMENDATION

To further enhance the preservation and understanding of Brunei's folklore, a comprehensive review of nationwide efforts to safeguard oral traditions is recommended. Future research should focus on documenting the folklore of Brunei's minority ethnic groups to ensure their unique cultural narratives are preserved. Additionally, exploring how folklore can serve as an educational tool for future generations would provide valuable insights into its integration into school curricula and community programs.

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Introduction, NY and MS; Methodology, NY ;Data Analysis, NY ;Review and Editing; MS. This research received no external funding

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## Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study



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