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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The semiotics of the Nyi Roro Kidul folktale as a cultural text and its pedagogical risks in Indonesian for foreign speakers (BIPA) classrooms

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ABSTRACT
The Nyi Roro Kidul folktale sits at the intersection of literature, myth, and a living belief system in Javanese-Sundanese society. This study aims to (1) map the narrative profile of two versions of the folktale; (2) analyze their symbols and implicit meanings using Roland Barthes's semiotics; and (3) identify the pedagogical risks of using the text in Indonesian for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) classrooms. A qualitative descriptive-interpretive library research design was employed, with two textual versions as data sources: V1 by HAR (Citra Budaya, 1984) and V2 by Soekardi and Syahbudin (Pustaka Setia, 2004). Analysis proceeded through Greimas's actantial model, Barthes's two-level semiotics, and pedagogical risk interpretation based on Pennycook and Kubota. The two versions construct distinct ideological systems for representing women, power, and destiny: V1 builds a myth of ambiguity through an unresolved transformation, whereas V2 builds a myth of emancipation in which sovereignty is conferred by a feminine mediator. Analysis of 26 symbols shows that the sign system operates systematically at connotative and mythical levels. Projected into the BIPA context, the findings reveal three categories of structural pedagogical risk: moralistic, interpretive closure, and cultural homogenization. The study offers an integrative framework for critically examining culturally loaded texts and affirms the need for critical mediation when local literary texts are used in foreign language classrooms.

Keywords: BIPA; Barthesian semiotics; critical multiculturalism; folktales; pedagogical risk.

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INTRODUCTION

Literary texts occupy a strategic position in teaching Indonesian for Foreign Speakers (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing, BIPA): they serve not only linguistic mastery but also the introduction of Indonesian values, symbols, and worldviews to foreign learners (Kusmiatun, 2019). Folktales are particularly representative because they condense a community's values and beliefs into compact, engaging narratives (Bascom, 1965). In BIPA, however, folktales have not been optimally used as materials that systematically examine the symbolic layers and implicit meanings of texts (Kusmiatun, 2019; Siswanto et al., 2025), a gap that becomes problematic when the selected texts carry deeply rooted cultural symbols and a strong spiritual dimension.

This challenge is especially evident in the Nyi Roro Kidul folktale, which sits at the intersection of literature, mythology, and belief systems that persist to this day. The figure appears in worship, at sacred sites, in dance, in the visual arts, and in film, and has been passed down among the Javanese and Sundanese as an integral part of their cosmology (Damayanti & Taum, 2025; Tisnawijaya, 2024). The text contains distinct symbols, including the color green, which is considered taboo along the southern coast, the sea as a supernatural realm governed by a female figure, and transformations that signify both punishment and enlightenment. These symbols cannot be grasped through literal reading; they require a contextual understanding of Javanese-Sundanese spirituality and cosmology. Without adequate guidance, BIPA learners may treat this semi-sacred text as an exotic fairy tale or misinterpret its spiritual content in ways that could offend the communities that embrace the tradition.

Studies on folktales in BIPA have grown in recent years. Several have identified regional folktales as alternative Indonesian-language teaching materials (Gultom & Yeti Mulyati, 2023; Ismayana et al., 2024), and recent work shows that folktales can support BIPA learners' self-transformation through a hermeneutic approach to cultural and character values (Siswanto et al., 2025). Studies on Nyi Roro Kidul generally focus on genealogy, spirituality, and political legitimation in Javanese-Sundanese oral tradition, without addressing her implications as teaching material in foreign language classrooms (Damayanti & Taum, 2025). Research on the pedagogical risks of texts laden with local symbolism and spirituality also remains very limited, both in BIPA and in foreign language learning generally.

The research gap, therefore, is the absence of studies that integratively connect narrative and symbolic analysis of the Nyi Roro Kidul folktale with a concrete mapping of

pedagogical risks in the BIPA classroom. The novelty of this study lies in a layered framework that integrates narrative analysis of two textual versions, Roland Barthes's semiotics to uncover implicit meanings, and the critical pedagogical perspectives of Kubota and Pennycook to identify cultural risks in the language classroom, an approach not previously applied to this text in the BIPA context.

Accordingly, this article addresses three research questions: (1) What is the narrative profile of the Nyi Roro Kidul folktale in the two textual versions? (2) What symbols and implicit meanings do both versions contain in relation to Javanese-Sundanese belief systems and cosmology? (3) How do these symbols and implicit meanings bear on the pedagogical risks in BIPA learning? Theoretically, this article contributes a framework for BIPA literary studies that integrates narrative and semiotic analysis with a critical pedagogical perspective. Practically, the findings can serve as a reference for BIPA teachers in teaching culturally loaded texts more reflectively and responsibly.

Roland Barthes's Semiotics: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

Roland Barthes developed a two-level semiotic system that serves as the main foundation of this study. At the first level, signs operate denotatively, as the literal and explicit meaning on the surface of the text. At the second level, they operate connotatively, carrying ideological and cultural values that are not explicitly written, including what is taboo or sacred. Barthes (1977) further explains that when connotation settles and is accepted as "natural" by a society, it becomes myth: a system of meaning that disguises its own cultural construction and presents itself as self-evident truth.

In the Nyi Roro Kidul text, symbols such as the color green, the southern sea, and bodily transformation function not merely as narrative elements but as a connotative sign system representing belief systems, gendered power relations, and the boundary between the human and supernatural worlds in Javanese-Sundanese cosmology. Because signs are polysemic, carrying more than one layer of meaning, the analysis of literary texts cannot stop at the literal surface but must systematically trace their connotative and mythical layers (Van Luxemburg et al., 1989).

Pedagogical Risks: Kubota's and Pennycook's Frameworks

The use of literary texts with strong symbolic and spiritual content in foreign language classrooms is not risk-free. Pennycook (2001), within the framework of Critical Applied Linguistics, asserts that the language classroom is not a neutral space: power relations among language, culture, and ideology operate within it. Classroom texts may embody specific value systems, such as local beliefs that remain prevalent in a community,

and unless teachers consciously guide interpretation, language classes may foster cultural misunderstanding instead of the critical and empathetic understanding they ought to cultivate.

Kubota (2004) explains this risk through the concept of "shallow multiculturalism." When a culture is presented as exotic, static, and monolithic, stripped of its complexity, internal diversity, and critical dimensions, learners tend to form stereotypes rather than a nuanced understanding. This risk is evident in the Nyi Roro Kidul folktale: without appropriate context and critical guidance, learners may reduce its spiritually charged symbols to a "scary story" or a "strange tradition." Kubota (2004) and Pennycook (2001) therefore emphasize that language teachers need critical awareness of the symbolic and ideological content of the texts they select, as well as guidance that enables learners to understand the cultural complexity those texts present.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach with a library research design, because the objects of study (narrative profiles, symbols, and implicit meanings in literary texts) are interpretive in nature and cannot be reduced to quantitative procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moleong, 2017). The primary data sources were two versions of the Nyi Roro Kidul folktale in printed book form: V1, Nyi Loro Kidul: Seri Cerita Rakyat [Folktale Series] (HAR, Citra Budaya, 1984), with a register of legendary etiology and a character-transformation plot; and V2, Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan [Queen of the Southern Coast] (Soekardi & Syahbudin, Pustaka Setia, 2004), with a historical-pragmatic etiological register of the West Javanese-Sundanese tradition. The difference in register between the two versions served as source triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to gauge narrative consistency and variation across texts. The data collected included narrative elements (register, setting, characters, conflict, resolution, dominant lens), connotatively meaningful diction, and symbols recurring in both texts.

The two versions were selected purposively on three considerations. First, both are printed editions that circulate commercially and remain obtainable on the book market, so they represent texts that BIPA teachers can realistically access and adopt as classroom materials. Second, V1 is among the earliest printed editions of the folktale available, while V2 appeared two decades later, allowing the analysis to capture how the narrative is repackaged across publishing periods. Third, the two versions differ in register and regional orientation, providing the contrast needed for intertextual comparison.

Data analysis was conducted in layers through three stages. First, narrative analysis using Greimas's (1983) actantial model to map the profiles of the two textual versions, with the results presented in an intertextual comparison table. Second, Roland Barthes's (1977) two-level semiotic analysis to identify the denotative and connotative meanings of symbols, metaphors, and culturally meaningful elements in the texts; the mechanism of myth formation was used to examine how connotative meanings settle into unwritten "cultural truths." Third, pedagogical risk interpretation: the findings of the symbolic analysis were projected into the BIPA classroom context using Pennycook's (2001) Critical Applied Linguistics framework and Kubota's (2004) concept of shallow multiculturalism, in order to produce a concrete mapping of pedagogical risks. Researchers determined the risk level of each sub-aspect based on three textual indicators. The first indicator is naturalization, which occurs when a text presents a value or practice as normal or commonplace, for example, through the use of a term like “generally” or a definitive concluding statement. The second indicator is cultural opacity, which arises when foreign learners require specific cultural knowledge (far removed from their own frame of reference) to understand an element. The third indicator is the absence of interpretive markers, which occurs when the text lacks qualifying phrases such as “konon” or “kabarnya.” Such phrases signal that the account provided is merely one version among many. Sub-aspects that meet all three indicators are assigned a HIGH risk rating; those meeting two indicators are assigned a MEDIUM-HIGH rating, while those meeting a single indicator are assigned a MEDIUM rating. Operationally, this research proceeded in four stages: (1) reading the two texts carefully, (2) coding narrative and symbolic elements, (3) conducting a three-stage layered analysis, and (4) synthesizing the findings into pedagogical recommendations.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the interpretation, each analytical claim was anchored in direct quotations with page numbers, forming an audit trail that allows readers to trace interpretations back to the source texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding and risk ratings were rechecked through repeated close readings of both texts, and interpretations of culture-specific symbols were cross-checked against previous studies on Javanese-Sundanese belief systems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section first presents the narrative analysis of the two versions using Greimas's (1983) actantial model across eleven narrative aspects, with the actantial structure of each

version (subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent) mapped in the final row of Table 1.

No.	Aspect	V1: Nyi Loro Kidul (HAR, 1984)	V2: Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004)
1	Register / Text Genre	Mystical-popular legend. Concise narrative (~36 pp.), dense, goes straight to the events. Simple style for young readers.	Long narrative-historical epic (~120 pp.). Elaborate, multilayered, with political detail and Sundanese-Javanese cosmology.
2	Setting	Island of Java (unspecified) → Palace → Forest → Southern Coast. Symbolic-archetypal setting, functioning as a ritual stage.	Kingdom of Pakuan Purba (West Java) → Gunungbatu → Bobotsari → Southern Coast (Pelabuhan Ratu). Historical-geographical setting, functioning as a map of political power.
3	Main Characters	Protagonist: Dewi Kadita. Antagonists: Dewi Mutiara + Nenek Jahil. Mediator: mysterious young man (masculine, unnamed). Few, archetypal characters.	Protagonist: Dewi Kadita. Antagonists: Dewi Mutiara + Ken Darti + Nini Jahil + Nini Sirkawur + Datuk Panglima. Mediators: a handsome young man (masculine; healing) and the jinn queen of the Southern Sea (feminine; throne and new name). Helpers: Tumenggung Aswawira and Soma. Many developing characters, including inter-state political figures.
4	Core Conflict	The ambition of a concubine (Dewi Mutiara) to remove the queen consort and her daughter. Linear domestic conflict ending in physical exile.	Layered struggle for legitimacy: polygamy conflict → palace intrigue → inter-state conflict → cosmic retribution. Nonlinear and complex structure.
5	Resolution	Ambiguous and unresolved. Kadita is cured of her disease, but her legs are permanently transformed into a fish tail. Nenek Jahil, spared by the Pandita's tigers, stumbles and falls into a ravine; Dewi Mutiara is not punished.	Complete and affirmative. Kadita is fully healed, crowned as Nyai Rara Kidul, Queen of the Southern Sea, and takes revenge on Dewi Mutiara directly, killing her.
6	Agent of Transformation	Mysterious young man (masculine) — Kadita is passive, following orders. Patriarchal gender structure: a woman is saved by a male figure.	Two-stage. A handsome young man (masculine) leads Kadita into the sea, where she is healed; the jinn queen (feminine) then actively chooses her on the basis of her inner qualities and confers the throne. The body is restored by a male figure, while power and identity are conferred by a female figure and an all-female court.
7	Nature of Transformation	Partial and liminal. Half-human, half-fish body — a permanent, unresolved liminality. Transformation as a price to be paid.	Total and complete. Body and identity fully restored; a new name is proclaimed. Transformation as a cosmic gift for unjust suffering.
8	Political Dimension	Minimal. The conflict centers on personal relations (king–concubine–queen consort). No inter-state conflict.	Very strong. The domestic conflict branches into inter-state conflict (Pakuan Purba, Gunungbatu, Bobotsari, Sumurbandung). Ethical counsel on war is narrated explicitly.
9	Narrative Closure	Open and epistemic. "KONON kabarnya... orang-orang memperkirakan..." [It is said... people suppose...] — Nyi Loro Kidul's identity is not confirmed, only supposed.	Definitive and affirmative. "Legenda itu terus bersambung dari mulut ke mulut... tidak pernah mati." [The legend continues from mouth to mouth... it never dies.] — the truth is affirmed, not questioned.

No.	Aspect	V1: Nyi Loro Kidul (HAR, 1984)	V2: Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004)
10	Character's Final Name	Nyi LORO Kidul. "Loro" = "two" (dual identity) and "sickness/suffering." The name carries the ambiguity of eternal suffering. Form: half fish.	Nyai RARA Kidul. "Rara/Roro" = "young princess/pure maiden." The name affirms nobility and purity. Form: a perfect human dressed in green.
11	Dominant Lens	Myth of ambiguity — a woman who never fully recovers from trauma. The open ending preserves a very wide space for interpretation.	Myth of emancipation — a woman who transcends trauma and attains the highest power. The interpretive space is open but framed by a strong ideological framework.
12	Actantial Structure (Greimas)	Subject: Kadita. Object: healing. Sender: not made explicit (the young man appears "from who knows where"). Receiver: Kadita. Helper: the mysterious young man. Opponents: Dewi Mutiara, Nenek Jahil, and the king, who orders the exile.	Subject: Kadita. Object: healing, then sovereignty and redress for her mother's death. Sender: the jinn queen's search for a human successor. Receiver: Kadita as Nyai Rara Kidul and the Southern Sea realm. Helpers: Tumenggung Aswawira and Soma, the young man, and the jinn queen. Opponents: Dewi Mutiara, Ken Darti, Nini Jahil, Nini Sirkawur, Datuk Panglima, and the king under Mutiara's charm.

Table 1. Narrative Profile of the Nyi Roro Kidul Folktale (V1 and V2)

Table 1 shows that although both versions share the same narrative foundation, they pursue different narrative strategies, most visibly in the agent of transformation, the nature of the resolution, and gender representation. V1 operates as a concise, archetypal mystical-popular legend, whereas V2 is a layered narrative-historical epic with geopolitical dimensions and more complex gender representation.

Barthes's (1977) two-level semiotic analysis was applied to 26 symbols (11 in V1 and 15 in V2). Each symbol was examined at the denotative and connotative levels, with direct quotations from the source texts as evidence.

No.	Aspect	V1: Nyi Loro Kidul (HAR, 1984) — 11 Symbols	V2: Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004) — 15 Symbols
		Symbol **Denotation & Connotation**	**Symbol** **Denotation & Connotation**
1	State of the Kingdom	The Prosperous Kingdom as a Symbol of Cosmic Balance Denotation: A great, prosperous kingdom whose people live safely. "Several centuries ago" marks temporal distance that legitimizes the story's authority. Connotation: Prosperity represents a balanced cosmic order — a foundational myth of a perfect world before disruption, a moral order soon to be tested by conflict.	The Kingdom of Pakuan Purba as a Symbol of Cosmic Balance Denotation: Pakuan Purba is the most renowned land in the Nusantara: "pasir wukir loh jinawi; gemah ripah kerta raharja" [fertile, prosperous, and orderly], uniting ocean, mountains, and land in harmony. Connotation: Prosperity represents the ideal order of ruler, people, and universe; the idealized opening also reads as nostalgia for a precolonial order.
2	Revelation / Prophecy	The Pandita's Prophecy as a Symbol of Double-Edged Revelation	The King's Dream as a Symbol of Destined Revelation

No.	Aspect	V1: Nyi Loro Kidul (HAR, 1984) — 11 Symbols Symbol Denotation & Connotation	V2: Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004) — 15 Symbols Symbol Denotation & Connotation
		Denotation: The Pandita's prophecy is incomplete, and the king fills it in according to his own wishes rather than its actual meaning. Connotation: An incomplete prophecy is a sign with an open signifier, bearing both good news and the seed of tragedy because it exceeds its giver's intention.	Denotation: The king dreams of his father's spirit, dressed as an ascetic and carrying a sun-like object — a symbol of power and divine presence. Connotation: The warning "so that you and your country may be safe" reveals the cosmopolitan dimension of Kadita's birth; the sun-object suggests a shining destiny or sovereignty changing hands.
3	Salute to the Troops	—	The Salute to the Troops as a Symbol of Heroic Legitimacy Denotation: The people hail the troops marching "like a giant dragon snake crossing villages and towns, mountains and valleys." Connotation: The naga, ruler of earth and water, symbolizes moving cosmic power; the procession legitimizes state violence and consolidates king–soldier–people loyalty.
4	Public Festivities	The Excessive Thanksgiving Feast as a Symbol of Hierarchical Reversal Denotation: At Dewi Mutiara's insistence, the crown prince's birth feast outshines Kadita's, yet the text notes that "its solemnity was hardly felt." Connotation: Engineered festivity is a political strategy to publicly downgrade Kadita; forced splendor loses its sanctity and foreshadows arrogance punished by fate.	The Public Festival in the Town Square as a Symbol of Cosmic Unity Denotation: The Lengser strikes the bende gong to summon the subjects; the king decrees "a folk arts festival for seven days and seven nights." Connotation: The bende sacralizes the square, and "seven days and seven nights" marks perfection. Cosmic irony: the celebrated princess is later cast out by the same system.
5	Ambition for Power	Dewi Mutiara's Eavesdropping as a Symbol of Corrupted Knowledge Denotation: Dewi Mutiara secretly eavesdrops on the sacred conversation between the king and the pandita from a hidden place. Connotation: Sacred knowledge stolen without spiritual readiness yields corrupt interpretation; corrupt power begins with illegitimately obtained knowledge.	Growing Ambition as a Metaphor for the Struggle for Power Denotation: Dewi Mutiara's ambition grows: "the poison instilled in her mind grew ever thicker" — she seeks to displace the first queen. Connotation: The "poison" metaphor reveals the subtle corruption of power; the domestic drama allegorizes political corruption and critiques polygamy as a source of rivalry.
6	War	—	War as a Symbol of Honor and the Legitimacy of Power Denotation: The king counsels that war is not for exterminating the enemy savagely: "An enemy who has surrendered must not be killed." Connotation: War becomes an arena for proving moral legitimacy rather than destruction; legitimate power is civilized power.
7	Conspiracy & the Shaman	Nenek Jahil as a Symbol of Transactional Evil Denotation: Nenek Jahil is a powerful devil worshipper living in a haunted	The Layered Conspiracy of Dewi Mutiara and Her Agents as a Symbol of Premeditated Evil Denotation: Through her maid Ken Darti,

No.	Aspect	V1: Nyi Loro Kidul (HAR, 1984) — 11 Symbols Symbol Denotation & Connotation	V2: Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004) — 15 Symbols Symbol Denotation & Connotation
		forest cave with owls and venomous snakes; she refuses Dewi Mutiara's gold and demands regular offerings instead. Connotation: As the antithesis of the Pandita Agung, she trades harm for ritual offerings; her attributes connote a "taboo space" of illicit power.	Dewi Mutiara engages three practitioners in turn: Nini Jahil's charmed clod misses its target, Nini Sirkawur's night sorcery is defeated by a "white power," and Datuk Panglima supplies a poison and a love charm (pp. 48–73). Connotation: When black magic fails, evil turns to mundane poison. Working through intermediaries, Mutiara keeps her own hands apparently clean — a more sophisticated structure of corruption than V1's single sorcerer.
8	Disease & the Body	The Disease of Boils as a Symbol of Double Exclusion Denotation: Dewi Rembulan and Kadita are suddenly covered in foul-smelling boils and scabies, so that no one dares approach them. Connotation: The disease creates physical and moral exclusion. The victims internalize externally imposed suffering as their own fault ("what sin have we committed") — Barthes's naturalization of connotation.	Dewi Kadita's Disease as a Symbol of Identity Transformation Denotation: After eating a cake sent by Dewi Mutiara, both princesses sleep for a day and a night and wake covered in foul-smelling scabies; they weep together over their suffering. Connotation: Beauty signals social legitimacy; its destruction collapses the princess's social existence and justifies politically motivated exclusion — the first stage of initiation.
9	Sorcery in the Palace	Sorcery in the Bedchamber as a Symbol of Violating the Taboo of Sacred Space Denotation: Nenek Jahil enters the marked bedchamber and blows over the bodies of the two sleeping Dewis. Connotation: Violating the bedchamber, the palace's most sacred space, is the most fundamental breach of taboo; breath, a symbol of life, is inverted into a medium of disease.	Poison, Charm, and Slander as Symbols of the Corruption of Power from Within Denotation: Nini Jahil and Nini Sirkawur each warn Ken Darti that evil directed at the innocent will return to its perpetrators. The king uncovers the poisoned cake but is then swayed by a charmed betel leaf under Mutiara's pillow. Connotation: The text embeds a slow but certain cosmic law; corruption works from within — even the king's judgment is captured by a charm — and insiders are both the most destructive and the most vulnerable to retribution.
10	Exile	Exile in Chests as a Symbol of Being Buried Alive Denotation: Dewi Rembulan and Kadita are carried to the forest in two tightly sealed chests. "Everyone knew what was inside." Connotation: The chests enact a symbolic burial — the women are socially "dead" — yet the chest also reads as a womb preceding rebirth.	Exile as a Symbol of Liminality and Purification Denotation: A carriage takes the princesses south, "farther and farther from the capital": "Your Highness, who is ill, is driven away instead of being cured." Connotation: In Javanese-Sundanese cosmology the south borders the supernatural world. The witnesses' silence depicts corrupt power, and the exile critiques a palace that fails to protect women.
11	Cosmic Mediator	The Mysterious Young Man as a Cosmic Mediator (Masculine) Denotation: A young nobleman suddenly	The Young Man and the Jinn Queen as Two-Stage Mediators (Masculine–Feminine)

No.	Aspect	V1: Nyi Loro Kidul (HAR, 1984) — 11 Symbols Symbol Denotation & Connotation	V2: Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004) — 15 Symbols Symbol Denotation & Connotation
		appears beside Kadita on the beach, "from who knows where," clearly no ordinary man. Connotation: Appearing "from who knows where" signals a cosmic entity. The masculine mediator makes a woman's transformation depend on a male figure — Propp's "donor."	Denotation: A handsome young man, first seen in Kadita's dream, leads her to leap into the sea, where she is healed; the jinn queen of the Southern Sea then chooses her as successor because she "has been wronged," her "heart is good," and she is "still a maiden." Connotation: Mediation is split: the body is restored through a male figure, but power and a new identity are conferred by a female ruler and an all-female court outside patriarchal structures; the three criteria mark an inner nobility beyond worldly power.
12	Transformation in the Sea	Ambiguous Transformation: Healed but Losing Her Legs Denotation: The boils vanish, but Kadita's legs become a fish tail with fins — permanently. Connotation: Healing and loss at once. Permanent liminality — neither human nor sea creature — makes her ruler of a border realm; trauma leaves a lasting mark.	Transformation in the Sea as a Symbol of Rebirth Denotation: Kadita's body is fully restored in the sea; "as if some force were holding her up," she does not drown. Connotation: A three-stage initiation — symbolic death, liminality, rebirth — with seawater as cosmic purifier; the water mirror is a moment of anagnorisis.
13	New Legitimacy	Nyi Loro Kidul as a Symbol of Unfinished Identity Denotation: The narrative closes uncertainly: "KONON [it is said]... people supposed that Nyi Loro Kidul was the incarnation of Dewi Kadita." Connotation: "KONON" creates deliberate epistemic uncertainty; "Loro" means both "two" and "suffering." What cannot be confirmed haunts collective imagination more strongly.	Becoming Queen of the Sea as a Symbol of New Spiritual Legitimacy Denotation: A proclamation: "from this day on Dewi Kadita is deemed not to exist. Her name is now Nyai Rara Kidul, the Young Queen of the Southern Sea." Connotation: Sea-kingdom legitimacy derives from inner quality, not bloodline; erasing the old name totally reconstructs identity and severs the old social ties.
14	Color & Nature	—	The Color Green as a Symbol of the Power of Nature Denotation: Kadita wears green because it "reminded her of the forest where she took refuge"; in the final confrontation "a green shadow flashed by." Connotation: Green turns the memory of exile into cosmic identity; unlike artificial palace colors, it represents power grounded in harmony with nature.
15	Retribution & Justice	—	The Final Confrontation as an Anatomy of the Corruption of Power Denotation: Dewi Mutiara deflects blame to the king; Nyai Rara Kidul answers that it was "your incitement and slander, using black magic." Connotation: The exchange exposes the anatomy of corruption — visible actor (king), real power (Mutiara), victim (Kadita), and obedient apparatus —

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			which ultimately faces cosmic accountability.

Table 2. Barthesian Semiotic Analysis: Symbols and Implicit Meanings in the Two Versions of the Nyi Roro Kidul Text

Of the 26 symbols, 11 symbol categories appear in both versions with different connotative meanings. Four are exclusive to V2 (the salute to the troops, war as moral legitimation, the color green, and the final cosmic retribution), while none is exclusive to V1. This asymmetry reflects V2's deeper connotative elaboration and confirms that texts sharing the same narrative surface can construct very different sign systems beneath it.

The semiotic findings were then projected into the BIPA context using Pennycook's (2001) Critical Applied Linguistics and Kubota's (2004) concept of shallow multiculturalism, yielding seven risk sub-aspects in three categories: moralistic, interpretive closure, and cultural homogenization.

No.	Type of Pedagogical Risk (BIPA)	V1: Nyi Loro Kidul (HAR, 1984)	V2: Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004)	Theoretical Basis & BIPA Implications
1a	MORALISTIC Moral Simplification: Good vs. Evil	Evidence: "Nenek Jahil was a devil worshipper... her face looked almost like a devil's." (p. 15) Risk: Learners may read this as a typical wicked "old/Javanese woman," reinforcing stereotypes; "devil" (setan) is a culture-specific marker. Level: HIGH	Evidence: "The poison instilled in Dewi Mutiara's mind grew ever thicker." (pp. 44–45) Risk: The metaphor may lead learners to conclude that "ambitious Indonesian women are evil," reading one text's moral evaluation as a general cultural value. Level: MEDIUM-HIGH	Kubota (2004): Cultural representations must not be presented as a single truth about a group; learners lack context to separate a text's moral judgment from actual community values.
1b	MORALISTIC Naturalization of Cosmic Punishment as a Cultural Norm	Evidence: "Nenek Jahil was destined to receive her punishment... her body fell toward the ravine." (p. 30) Risk: Learners may conclude that Indonesians believe in automatic cosmic law, flattening diverse belief systems into one mystical narrative. Level: HIGH	Evidence: "A flash of lightning shot from her finger... the arrogant body burned beyond recognition." (p. 118) Risk: Supernatural violence may be read as "the Indonesian way of solving problems," causing unfacilitated culture shock. Level: MEDIUM-HIGH	Pennycook (2001): Texts are never neutral; the cosmic-retributive ideology must be made explicit so that it is not taken as an accurate picture of Indonesian values.
2a	INTERPRETIVE CLOSURE One Version as the Single Truth	Evidence: "KONON... people supposed that Nyi Loro Kidul was the incarnation of Dewi Kadita." (p. 36) Risk: Learners may miss the epistemic nuance of "konon," "katanya," and "kabarnya"; without	Evidence: "The legend continues from generation to generation... it has never died." (p. 120) Risk: The definitive ending may be read as "Indonesian history" rather than one folktale version. Level: HIGH	Pennycook (2001): A single text without comparison hides the constructed nature of texts; epistemic asymmetry means learners cannot know other versions exist.

No.	Type of Pedagogical Risk (BIPA)	V1: Nyi Loro Kidul (HAR, 1984)	V2: Nyi Roro Kidul: Ratu Pantai Selatan (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004)	Theoretical Basis & BIPA Implications
		facilitation the story becomes cultural fact. Level: MEDIUM (depending on facilitation)		
2b	INTERPRETIVE CLOSURE Obscuring the Diversity of Local Versions	Evidence: "People supposed that Nyi Loro Kidul was the incarnation of Dewi Kadita." (p. 36) Risk: Used alone, V1 hides versions with different names, settings, and resolutions; one text stands for the whole tradition. Level: MEDIUM-HIGH	Evidence: "In West Java there was a kingdom called Pakuan Purba, renowned throughout the Nusantara." (p. 5) Risk: V2 narrows the story to Sundanese tradition without saying so, obscuring Central Javanese, Mataram, Banyuwangi, and other versions. Level: HIGH	Kubota (2004): Critical teaching exposes learners to multiple voices; a single text implies one folktale where hundreds of versions coexist.
3a	HOMOGENIZATIO N Indonesia = Java: Ethnic Centralism in the Text	Evidence: "Several centuries ago, on the island of Java, there stood a great kingdom." (p. 3) Risk: Learners often equate Java with Indonesia, ignoring 17,000 islands, 300+ ethnic groups, and other folktale traditions. Level: HIGH	Evidence: "...a kingdom called Pakuan Purba, renowned throughout the Nusantara." (p. 5) Risk: "Nusantara" suggests a national scope for a Sundanese-centered story, erasing the maritime traditions of Papua, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Sumatra. Level: HIGH	Kubota (2004): Homogenization creates the monocultural and monolingual fallacies, presenting one of the world's most diverse countries as monocultural.
3b	HOMOGENIZATIO N Naturalization of Polygamy & the Patriarchal System	Evidence: "In those days, a king generally had concubines." (p. 3) Risk: "Generally" claims universality; learners may read it as a normative claim about Indonesian culture, causing real-life misunderstandings. Level: HIGH	Evidence: Mutiara accepts the king's proposal on condition that a son she bears becomes crown prince, "because the Queen has not borne a single son." (pp. 38–39) Risk: V2 presents a second royal marriage and the preference for a male heir as an ordinary state matter, a taken-for-granted backdrop that may invite the generalization that Indonesia lacks gender equality. Level: MEDIUM-HIGH	Pennycook (2001): Teaching materials open discussion of the social practices they depict; uncontextualized polygamy teaches a problematic gender ideology along with language.
3c	HOMOGENIZATIO N Physical Beauty Standards as a Universal Value	Evidence: "The older Dewi Kadita grew, the more radiant her beauty... Dewi Srangenge, Goddess of the Sun." (p. 3) Risk: Extended beauty descriptions suggest that physical beauty is a woman's primary value in Indonesian culture. Level: MEDIUM-HIGH	Evidence: "All the dignitaries were awestruck at Dewi Kadita's beauty, all the more in green attire." (p. 92) Risk: Even as queen, her legitimacy is mediated by beauty; learners may infer that women's power must be validated by appearance. Level: MEDIUM	Kubota (2004): Gender representation shapes cross-cultural perception; repeated beauty standards may present a feudal-patriarchal convention (the male gaze) as an Indonesian norm.

Table 3. Analysis of the Pedagogical Risks of Using the Nyi Roro Kidul Text in the BIPA Classroom

The risk levels for each sub-aspect are summarized in Table 4, which can serve as an initial guide for teachers considering the use of one or both versions in the BIPA classroom.

No.	Risk Type & Sub-Aspect	V1 (1984)	V2 (2004)	Riskier Version
1a	Moralistic — Moral Simplification: Good vs. Evil	HIGH	MEDIUM-HIGH	V1
1b	Moralistic — Naturalization of Cosmic Punishment	HIGH	MEDIUM-HIGH	V1
2a	Interpretive Closure — One Version as the Truth	MEDIUM	HIGH	V2
2b	Interpretive Closure — Obscuring the Diversity of Versions	MEDIUM-HIGH	HIGH	V2
3a	Homogenization — Indonesia = Java (Ethnic Centralism)	HIGH	HIGH	Both
3b	Homogenization — Naturalization of Polygamy & Patriarchy	HIGH	MEDIUM-HIGH	V1
3c	Homogenization — Beauty Standards as a Value	MEDIUM-HIGH	MEDIUM	V1

Table 4. Summary of Pedagogical Risk Levels by Text Version

The four tables correct an assumption behind the question of this text's suitability as BIPA material: that there is a single Nyi Roro Kidul text to be evaluated as a whole. There are at least two ideologically distinct narrative systems, each constructing a different reality about women, power, and justice, which is what Barthes (1977) calls the work of myth.

This mechanism of naturalization is not exclusive to the Nusantara tradition. Cobley (2006) shows that Barthesian myth works most effectively when it merges with everyday systems of representation, so that the ideology it contains feels like fact. Essebo (2019) adds that myths tied to a specific place, such as the southern sea as a realm of feminine power, function as cognitive schemas that shape how people perceive and behave within that space. In the Nyi Roro Kidul texts, the myth of the figure and the myth of her realm reinforce each other, turning the southern coast of Java into a system of signs with cosmic significance beyond its geographical location. The maturity of this mythical system makes pedagogical mediation impossible to ignore.

The most decisive divergence between V1 and V2 lies not in setting or number of characters but in how the transformation is mediated and resolved. In V1, the unnamed young man who instructs Kadita to plunge into the sea is a typical donor as defined by Propp (1968): a figure who arrives, hands over an instruction or a magical object, and disappears. Kadita never actively chooses her transformation, and the story ends with it. V2 also opens the transformation through a handsome young man who leads Kadita into the sea, where she is healed (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004, pp. 82–83), but it adds a decisive

second stage: the jinn queen of the Southern Sea, presiding over an all-female court, explicitly chooses Kadita as her successor on three inner criteria: she has been wronged, her heart is good, and she is still a maiden (p. 89). In V2, Kadita's body is thus restored by a male figure, whereas her power and new identity are conferred by a female one. These are two philosophies of how women acquire power: in V1 transformation is received and remains incomplete, while in V2 it culminates in sovereignty granted outside the patriarchal palace.

This difference resonates with comparative research on gender and traditional narratives. V1 mirrors what Al-Gailany et al. (2025) identify in classic children's narratives, where female characters wait to be rescued while agency remains with male figures. Aupitak (2024) shows that the shift from the disempowered heroine to the feminist quest heroine is marked by the same structural change: women attain transformation through internal qualities rather than receiving it from a masculine figure. In both versions the healer is male, but in V2 the source of Kadita's power is female; the defining ideological element is therefore who bestows power, not who heals. Zerar's (2014) study of Kabyle folklore in Algeria adds that female intermediaries often preserve a collective memory of a pre-patriarchal value system, persisting as latent resistance to the prevailing gender hierarchy.

Among all the symbols analyzed, the disease of boils and scabies is the most analytically powerful because it reveals a very subtle working of ideology. At the denotative level, the disease results from sorcery in V1 and from a poisoned cake sent by Dewi Mutiara in V2. At the connotative level, it performs a double exclusion, physical as well as moral. Most striking is the victim's response in V1: Kadita asks, “Oh, Almighty One, what sin have we committed?” The question reveals that she internalizes a logic of punishment for suffering that was in fact imposed from outside. This is precisely what Barthes (1977) calls the naturalization of connotation: an ideological construction disguised as a moral logic that feels natural and beyond question.

The transformation of the body as a sign system has counterparts elsewhere in the cultural semiotics of the Nusantara. Prihatin et al. (2025), analyzing the Ajisaka story in the Javanese kentrung tradition, show that a character's physical change encapsulates the community's moral value system, so that the body becomes an inner narrative that can be read publicly. Sumarsono (2025) adds that representations of the female body in traditional narratives operate at the intersection of beauty, moral purity, and the legitimacy

of power. For BIPA learners, reading bodily symbols literally means losing their most ideological layer of meaning.

At the level of myth, the two versions construct opposing grand narratives. V1 establishes a myth of ambiguity: a ruler whose power stems from her imperfection, from a permanent liminality as a being neither fully human nor fully a sea creature. The final name "Nyi Loro Kidul" carries this ambiguity directly, since the Javanese "loro" means both "two" and "sickness/suffering." V2 constructs the opposite myth of emancipation, in which unjust suffering is followed by cosmic justice beyond the reach of the human system. The proclamation of Kadita's new identity is its most fundamental mythical operation: the erasure of the old name and the construction of an identity that severs ties with the previous social system.

The coexistence of two opposing myths within a single tradition is not an anomaly but a fundamental property of folklore as a living symbolic system. Díaz Troya (2022) shows that the multiplicity of versions in oral tradition reflects active power negotiations among social groups. Sheik (2018) finds that African folktales with active female protagonists often operate as texts of resistance against patriarchal norms, using fiction as an arena of negotiation unavailable in social space. V2, in which the jinn queen actively chooses Kadita beyond patriarchal structures, can be read within the same framework, and Alshhre (2024) similarly shows that women's narratives can reconstruct cultural identity from within patriarchal frameworks rather than rejecting them wholesale.

The color green in V2 deserves particular attention as the most explicit example of a text consciously building a system of signifiers. V2 explains the choice of green narratively, as a memory of the forest of exile transformed into a cosmic identity. A Barthesian reading shows this as deliberate naturalization: a color first associated with trauma becomes a symbol of power that appears natural. The finding matters for BIPA because it relates to a living practice: in many communities along Java's southern coast, green is considered taboo. Alieva et al. (2026) show that natural imagery, though present across literary traditions, encodes culture-specific worldviews; green in V2 is precisely such a culturally bound sign, and foreign learners can hardly connect it with the prohibition without explicit mediation by the teacher.

Symbols born of traumatic experience reflect a more general principle in the semiotics of cultural ritual. Ziqiao (2024) shows that symbols in performance traditions create a "hidden language" that can only be grasped by those with adequate cultural literacy, and Barrett (2023) adds that religious symbolism actively changes how subjects

experience reality. Presenting the green-color taboo merely as cultural trivia, without exploring its connotative and mythical layers, is therefore a pedagogical failure.

The data in Tables 3 and 4 yield a methodologically important finding: the two versions do not have identical risk profiles but complement each other. V1 is riskier in moralistic terms because its antagonist is represented in black-and-white terms: Nenek Jahil builds a connotation of taboo space that leaves no room for social context. Yet V1 is more hermeneutically open thanks to the use of "KONON" [it is said] at the end of the narrative. V2 carries a higher risk of interpretive closure, defining the identity of Nyai Rara Kidul so definitively that readers are left no room for doubt, while presenting a structurally more complex portrayal of gender. This distribution reinforces Pennycook's (2001) argument that no text in a language classroom is truly neutral, and indicates that a teacher relying on only one version exposes BIPA learners to an incomplete risk profile.

This asymmetrical distribution of risk directly shapes how teachers implement critical pedagogy. Palacios-Hidalgo and Huertas-Abril (2025) emphasize that critical language pedagogy requires not only a teacher's awareness of sensitive subject matter but an instructional design that gives learners a structured space to question, compare, and negotiate meaning. Abad-Célleri et al. (2025) further demonstrate that learners equipped to interrogate the narratives they encounter develop stronger intercultural competence. Both findings support comparing two versions of a story in the classroom, an approach that is not only safer but potentially more effective for fostering critical cultural literacy.

The risk of cultural homogenization, identified in both versions, may be the most practically consequential finding and the least discussed in studies of folktales as teaching materials. V1 opens with "on the island of Java there stood a kingdom" without an ethnic marker, while V2 uses "Nusantara" to give a national dimension to a highly Sundanese-centric narrative. Both may lead learners to perceive Indonesia as a single cultural entity centered on Javanese or Sundanese tradition. Kubota (2004) calls this the monocultural fallacy; in BIPA, learners may finish a program more fluent in talking about Nyi Roro Kidul than aware that Indonesia has more than 300 ethnic groups with equally rich folktale traditions. This finding addresses a gap left by previous research (Gultom & Yeti Mulyati, 2023; Ismayana et al., 2024; Siswanto et al., 2025).

From a broader perspective, Demuro & Gurney (2018) stress that the main pitfall of literature-based language teaching is the tendency to treat texts as a direct window onto culture, without showing learners that every text is a construction of a particular historical and ideological context. Moutia (2023) shows that cultural essentialism and gender

stereotypes often work hand in hand in language textbooks, a finding directly relevant to sub-aspects 3b and 3c in Table 3. Parba and Fernandez-Dalona (2022) caution that local texts used without an adequate analytical framework may reproduce a different but equally problematic cultural hegemony: in this case, not Western hegemony but Javanese-Sundanese hegemony over Indonesia's broader cultural diversity.

Theoretically, these findings show that combining Greimas's narrative analysis, Barthes's two-level semiotics, and Kubota-Pennycook's critical pedagogy connects the way a text constructs meaning with the way that meaning may shape foreign learners' perceptions, a link that none of the approaches captures on its own. This responds to Hird's (2023) call for analytical frameworks capable of revealing the ideological content that each text carries and that must be critically negotiated.

The strongest practical implication is to use both versions side by side as an active teaching strategy. Instead of selecting a single text and adding cultural notes, the teacher can center discussion on the differences between V1 and V2, asking, for example, “Why is Kadita healed by a young man in both versions, yet only in V2 receives power from a female ruler?” or “Why does the same character's name carry different meanings?” Learners can then discover that culture is a system under constant negotiation rather than a fixed body of knowledge. This aligns with Pennycook's (2001) critical language pedagogy and Kubota's (2004) “deep multiculturalism,” in which teachers design prompts that help learners examine textual complexity reflectively.

CONCLUSION

This study yields three interrelated findings that answer the three research questions.

First, the narrative analysis demonstrates that V1 (HAR, 1984) and V2 (Soekardi & Syahbudin, 2004) are not two packagings of the same story but two ideological systems for representing women, power, and destiny. V1 constructs a myth of ambiguity through an incomplete transformation, a masculine mediator, and an epistemic closure that preserves mystery; V2 constructs a myth of emancipation through a complete, two-stage transformation in which a male figure restores Kadita's body but a female ruler chooses her for her inner qualities and confers sovereignty. The divergence crystallizes even in the final names, “Loro,” carrying the ambiguity of suffering, and “Rara,” affirming nobility, and reflects active ideological negotiation over how women and power ought to be represented (Díaz Troya, 2022).

Second, the Barthesian semiotic analysis of 26 symbols reveals that the sign system operates systematically at the connotative and mythical levels. The disease of boils as a mechanism for internalizing suffering, the exile chest as both burial and womb of initiation, the transformation in the sea as a three-stage ritual of rebirth, and the color green as an identity born of trauma cannot be captured through literal reading. For BIPA learners, these symbols operate as a "hidden language" (Ziqiao, 2024), so presenting them without explicit connotative mediation is both a hermeneutic and a pedagogical failure.

Third, projecting the findings into the Kubota-Pennycook framework identifies three categories of structural pedagogical risk: moralistic, interpretive closure, and cultural homogenization. These risks stem not from weaknesses of the text but from the epistemic asymmetry inherent in the BIPA context, namely the distance between the cultural knowledge embedded in the text and the standpoint of foreign learners. Because the risk profiles of the two versions are complementary, using them side by side is not merely safer but potentially more effective in building intercultural competence (Abad-Célleri et al., 2025).

The theoretical contribution of this study is an integrated framework of Greimas's narrative analysis, Barthes's semiotics, and Kubota-Pennycook's critical pedagogy that can be adapted to other BIPA texts carrying local beliefs (Demuro & Gurney, 2018; Hird, 2023), and that exposes how local texts may reproduce Javanese-Sundanese hegemony over Indonesia's broader cultural diversity (Parba & Fernandez-Dalona, 2022).

This study has several limitations. First, it is confined to two printed versions (1984 and 2004) and does not cover oral variants from other regions, such as Mataram, Surakarta, Yogyakarta, and Banyuwangi, or audiovisual adaptations, which future comparative research could examine. Second, the pedagogical risks are mapped through textual analysis and theoretical projection rather than classroom observation, so their occurrence and severity remain to be tested empirically. Future research could trial side-by-side versions in BIPA classes with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds, involve BIPA teachers and members of the tradition-bearing community to validate the identified risks, and apply the framework to other folk narratives tied to living local beliefs.

Ultimately, the role of BIPA teachers extends beyond selecting texts considered culturally safe to developing approaches that help learners navigate cultural complexity through critical engagement, empathy, and reflection. The symbolic layers, ideological dimensions, and pedagogical risks of the Nyi Roro Kidul story do not justify excluding it from the syllabus; addressed through appropriate guidance, they become valuable learning

resources that show learners that cultural meanings, like texts themselves, are neither uniform nor fixed, but continually interpreted, contested, and renegotiated.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical considerations

Not applicable. This study does not involve human participants, animal subjects, clinical interventions, or the collection of personal and sensitive data. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors declare that the generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool Claude.ai was used exclusively for language editing and/or grammatical improvement. The use of AI did not influence the scientific content, study design, data analysis, data interpretation, results, or conclusions of the manuscript. Full responsibility for the content remains with the authors.

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