

# From Written Literature to Oral-based Expressive Culture: From Prose to Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Researches

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## Introduction

I am not ecstatic to claim myself as, in its strictest academic sense, a researcher. Though I have the drive to question things- people say that curiosity is the mother of knowledge quest, thus a research endeavor-I often see myself as someone having to carry out (academic) research just because my profession as a university lecturer requires me too so. In other words, if the university policy allows me to avoid being a researcher, I will be more than happy to stay away from it. The actual call in me is to be an educator and musical entertainer. Thus, for this reason, have I carried out my previous research half-heartedly? Of course not. My previous research has complied with the academic requirement and integrity. In this introductory paragraph, I really want to say that research is not my cup of tea. And that is why my research journey is not fertile land, unaccompanied by pleasant songs.

This paper outlines my research journey from undergraduate years to the present. Though my senior high school years were also filled with research activities- I was an A2 (biology-streamed) high school student in Sumba. Thus, our class often involved biological and chemistry

experiments and research; my “serious” research activities started during my undergraduate years at the university. This paper briefly presents my previous research, research publications, and the shift of my research topics in expressive culture.

## Research on Literature: Undergraduate Years

Entering the Faculty Letters of Sanata Dharma University Yogyakarta in 1993 allowed me to learn about the literary world. In addition to taking English language skill courses, most courses dealt with literature, such as poetry, prose, and drama classes. These three main genres of literature were taught gradually from lower to higher semesters. Students should take Poetry 1, Poetry II, and so on. As far as I remember, there were some topics of research I dealt with during my undergraduate years, such as metaphysical poetry, theater of the absurd, and some prose works like the novels written by American writers, for instance, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, but my attention was heavily drawn by black writers’ works such as *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. The works of the American black writers were, for me, very appealing since their work represented the grim reality of being black and being a woman. As mimetic criticism suggests, a literary work is produced in a particular context. It is related to and an imitation of reality. While a literary work differs from historical accounts, it may offer readers sociological and historical information about its milieu. For my undergraduate thesis, I picked up *The Color Purple* as the object of my research.

Titling my undergraduate thesis *Double Discriminations: Racism and Sexism against Black Women as seen in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple* (Wohangara, 1998), I argued that the main female characters in the novel: Celine and her sister, Nettie, experienced double discriminations due to the ethnicity and sexuality. The discrimination happened because their lives were gripped by values operated by a racial and patriarchal society. In order to cope with the conflicts and injustice they faced, the racially and sexually discriminated characters, as the voices of the novelist, highlighted

the utmost importance of education as a way to gain freedom for women, the development of black women's solidarity as a supporting system for women to fight for freedom, and the nurture of love as a life virtue in life. Researching *The Color Purple* was my first serious attempt to be involved in an academic endeavor.

After completing my undergraduate study, I worked as a university lecturer in 1999. In addition to teaching activities and doing community service, carrying out research is a requirement for a university lecturer. Due to poor archives, I could only remember one research during my early years as a lecturer. The research dealt with poems written by an underground poet, Wiji Thukul. Titled *Thukul's Poems Of Resistance in Aku Ingin Jadi Peluru* (Wohangara, 2003), I assert how through his blatant pieces of poems, Wiji Thukul cried about the injustice committed by the government. Those who attempted to voice critically about the injustice done by the state frequently faced the government's "iron hands". In Indonesia's history, it is not uncommon that criticism against the government is often deemed as threatening national stability. Therefore, critics need to be culturized through various kinds of terror. Conscience writers (Mangunwijaya's term) are the easy targets of state violence because they portray the powerless, "wong cilik" (the common folk/little people), as the victims of progress and development; for an authoritative regime, such criticism does not sound good because it makes it look bad in front of the public. In the New Order regime, Wiji Thukul is one of the Indonesian poets advocating for "wong cilik". His poems are screams of the people from huts, factories, and graves. Thukul himself disappeared—no grave to be found so far, and some people believed he was already killed for being too articulated about injustice against the little people.

### **Research on Literature: Graduate Years**

I spent two years (2002-2005) for a Master's at the Kajian Bahasa Inggris (Language Studies) Sanata Dharma University. While I still considered (written) literature as an area of study and research, my Master's years were the time of transition from written to oral expressive cultures—something I will talk about soon. What I mean by written literature is

the work presented in written forms, such as poems, prose, and novels. In contrast, oral literature, or folklore, is the kind of expressive culture presented in oral forms.

I remember pretty well that my plan for my Master's thesis was to write about the ritual speeches, a folklore genre of the people in eastern Sumba. Unfortunately, my academic advisor did not allow me to do because, he argued, the topic I suggested was outside the scope of the Language Studies Master's Program. Though disappointed, I had no choice but to comply with the institution's policy. My Master's thesis and another research on Shakespeare's play were still in the area of written literature.

Applying post-colonial criticism, I wrote a thesis titled *Maryze Conde's Rayze as a Re-contextualization of Emily Bronte's Heathcliff: Writing Back Heathcliff in a Post-colonial Perspective* (Wohangara, 2005). I ventured into the post-colonial writers' project to rewrite canonical literature by bringing forward the experiences of the marginalized, colonized people. In this practice of intertextuality, I did a comparative study of two novels: Emily Bronte's canonical work, *Wuthering Heights*, and Maryze Conde's rewriting, *Windward Heights*. The research aimed to reveal the traces of colonial encounters and how they brought consequences to the characters in the novel. I concluded that *Wuthering Heights* bore colonial perceptions. One character, Heathcliff, was degraded to a level of animality and even "a thing" since he was a poor and dark-skinned man without origin. Consequently, he was an outsider. Conde's *Wuthering Heights* brought into light the complexity of colonial assumptions and practices by recreating Heathcliff as Rayze. Like his mirror character, Rayze also suffered from degradation due to the color of his skin. However, Rayze was a self-conscious black African man. He understood himself as being marginalized and colonized by the dominating Whites, and this consciousness caused him to reconstruct himself by having a hybrid life. This reconstruction within the colonial power, in turn, turned out to be his tool of resistance.

The second research was *The Usage of the Second Personal Pronoun, You, in Shakespeare's Othello* (Wohangara, 2006b). This research attempted

to reveal the use and implied meaning of the second personal pronoun, *you*, in the Early Modern English period. Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, became the object of scrutiny. I found that during the Middle English period, the form *thou* was used among those knowing each other well and to address children or people of inferior social class. The form *you* was considered a way of showing respect when addressing someone superior. In the Early Modern English period, *you* became the standard usage in all grammatical functions and social situations. By the end of the sixteenth century, *thou* started to be used in religious and literary contexts. In medieval times, because of the influence of the French, the form *you* was adopted in England. That is why the French pronoun *vous* was considered the correspondence of *you* in English, and it expressed a way of mutual respect and politeness.

Furthermore, let me share my research-topic transition from written to oral expressive culture. On a visit to Sumba around 2000, I happened to meet Gregory L. Forth 2002, a professor of Anthropology at the University of Alberta, Canada, a renowned anthropologist whose monograph, *Rindi: An Ethnographic Study of a Traditional Domain in Eastern Sumba* (Forth, 1981), provides extensive descriptions of Rindi (Sumbanese) culture. In a chitchat, we talked about our research interests. I told him that my research is related to American or British literature, and he had been engaged in social and cultural anthropoidal research, especially in Flores and Sumba. While encouraging me, saying that doing research in literature is a great thing, he asked me about the possibility of writing about "your own culture." Forth convinced me that Sumbanese oral expressive culture was an appealing research arena.

My encounter with Forth was an eye-opener. Since then, I have promised to dedicate my academic life to writing about Sumbanese's oral tradition. My interest in oral tradition/folklore, then, I believe, caused me to win a scholarship to pursue my doctoral study at the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology of Indiana University, Bloomington, USA, in 2018-2021. Though I could not complete my study at Indiana University, my courses at this university confirm my decision to single out folklore as my research thing.

## Research on Folklore: At Present

I will here present my 8 folklore-related researches (published and unpublished), especially the ones related to the island of Sumba. The first is on the genres of oral tradition in Sumba (Wohangara, 2006a). [Eastern] Sumba possesses 6 genres of oral tradition: 1) *Lii Ndai/Lii Marapu* concerning with the history of the clans (*kabihu*) and the ancestors, 2) *Lawiti luluk*, the ritual speeches uttered in context of rituals and sacred narrative. 3) *lii pangerangu*, myth and folktales, 4) *Lawiti Ludbu*, songs performed in various occasions, 5) *Padikangu*, riddles performed as recreational activity, and 6) *piapaku*, word games sung or recited in staccato rhythms.

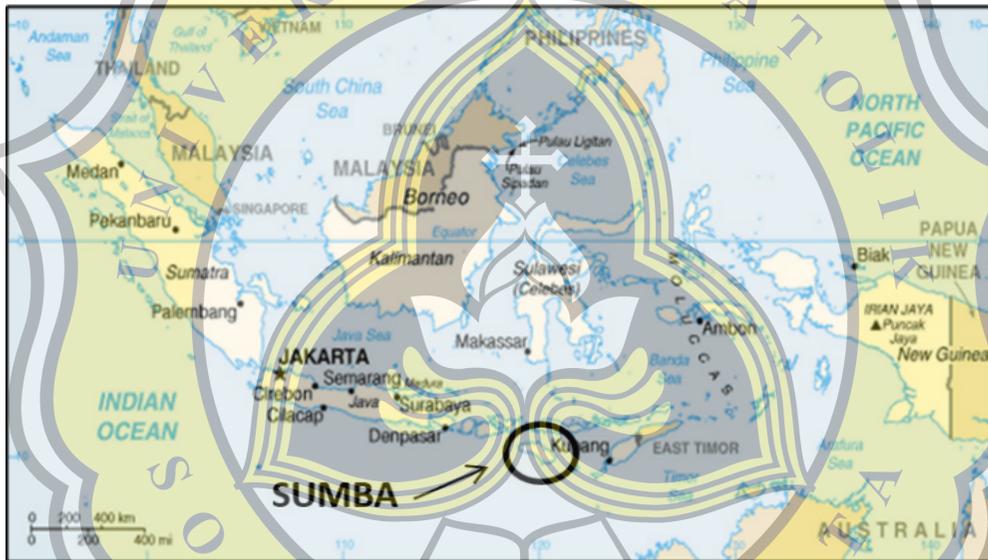


Figure 1: Sumba as the main research area

In 2012, I published a book on Sumbanese folktales in 3 languages: Indonesian, Kambera (local language of the eastern Sumbanese) and English (Wohangara, 2012). The book consisted of 10 big and small folktales compiled during the period of 2005 – 2011. After some revisions, the same book will be republished this year for it is still in demand for teaching local culture at high schools in Sumba.

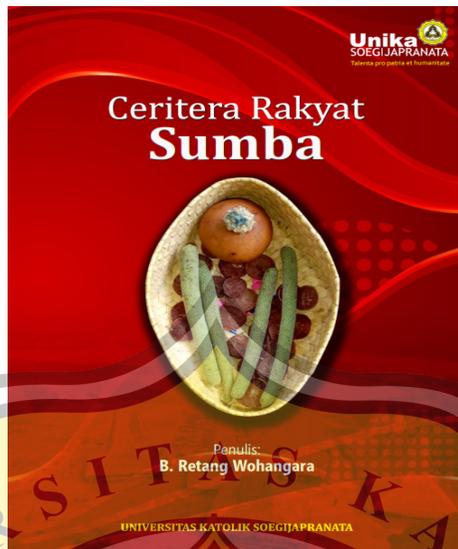


Figure 2: Upcoming re-publication of Sumbanese's Folktales in 2023

The third published research is on the so-called access ritual in eastern Sumba. Published in the *Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, and Literature* (CELT), the article delineated an access ritual named *pa-arinyangu* (the way of becoming a guest) in Sumbanese culture. This ritual was performed when someone paid a visit to others. Visiting somebody's house was an act of entering somebody else's private domain. It was therefore necessary for the both parties (i.e. the guest and the host) to abide to certain manners so as to maintain a desirable social encounter. The article was titled *Access Ritual in Eastern Sumba, Indonesia* (Wohangara, 2013).

My unpublished research was titled *[And then] You can Digest it in your Stomach, and Weigh it in your Chest: A Contextual Analysis and Interpretation of Sumbanese Marriage Ritual Couplets* (Wohangara, 2015). This research found out that ritual speech was an interesting research topic. Sumbanese ritual speeches used in marriage negotiation were a special way of communication delivered in rich metaphoric expression. Characterized by parallel structure, these ritual couplets could be well comprehended if the researcher took into a serious account of the social-cultural contexts from where the speeches originated from.

Another unpublished research was the one on Sumbanese folksongs. As the title, *Thematic and Word Analysis of Eastern Sumbanese Folksongs* (Wohangara, 2018) suggested, the research brought forwards 8 (eight) folksongs from eastern Sumba compiled in the book titled *Songs of Ata*. The songs became the singer's means of expressing her deep feelings of loss, suffering in life, sadness in love relationship, and displacement from their land. Most songs met the 4 features of love and lyric folksongs: appealing to deep feeling, using of first-person point of view, being lack of concreteness, and frequently using of verbs. Only one song used a metaphor related to nature. The headwords and their modifiers supported the ideas that folksongs expressed the deep and "dark" feelings of human beings. Noun/verb phrases like bitter heart, long hands, eternal flame, sick/bitter heart, evil month, stupid year, wrong heart, and forced separation really represented the dark and bitter side of human experiences.

I published an article, *Children Folklore in Eastern Sumba, Indonesia* (Wohangara, 2020) in *Linguamedia Journal*. The article offered a descriptive analysis of the children's folklore, i.e. games, in eastern Sumba, Indonesia. The invasive presence of technology certainly affects the existence of "old-time" children's folklore. Children of the present are heavily exposed to "modern games" that overpower the vitality of the traditional games. Some people see this shift as something inevitable, and the only way to respond to this situation is by accepting this "game revolution." However, some old-time game supporters attempt to revitalize the old-time children folklore by holding events where children's traditional games are performed. The latter believe that maintaining children folklore is of importance because it is a matter of identity, and above all, children's modern games cannot replace the social values offered by the traditional ones. This article, written based on the data from interviews and discussions on social media, listed some traditional games in eastern Sumba. Like any other children in other parts of the world, Sumbanese children were also friendly with modern games. Yet, some still performed the "old time" games. In addition, this article also gave some description of each game and the values the participants might learn from each one.

The seventh research-based article was titled [*And now We are*] *Dogs with One Single Bark, [and] horses with One Single Running Track: Metaphors in Sumbanese Marriage Ritual Speeches* (Wohangara, 2021). The research studied 13 ritual couplets commonly presented in marriage negotiations. These research materials were mainly taken from the research's own collection in 2010, and few others from a compilation of a Sumbanese early researcher, Oembu Hina Kapita, 1987. In analyzing the selected ritual couplets, I interviewed 3 Sumbanese informants by phone. This study concluded that a formalistic approach on the study of Sumbanese ritual speech could be potentially misleading. In order to really understand the ideological meaning of the ritual speeches, sufficient knowledge on the social and cultural contexts from where the speeches came from or insider perspectives was a necessity.

My recent research was concerned with a high-context ritual practiced by the Sumbanese people. The research report was titled *Warung Hupu Liku Ritual: A Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Sumbanese Traditional Community, Eastern Nusa Tenggara* (Wohangara, 2023). This research described an ecological ritual practiced by the traditional community living in the island of Sumba. The ritual, called 'warung hupu liku' (putting back the rope tips), gave readers an idea of how the given community understood their relationship with nature, which in turn, exposed their ecological ethics. Primary research data were collected through interviews with 4 experts of Sumbanese culture/environmental activists and 2 ritual speakers (*wimang*). The research indicated that the ritual portrayed the Sumbanese's worldview of human-nature relationship. For the Sumbanese traditional communities, human and nature were partners which maintain reciprocity. In this reciprocal relationship, nature should be treated with utmost respect. "Take what you need" was an ecological ethic allowing nature to restore and sustain human's life. Indonesia is rich in Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), and in line with the cause of integral ecology, TEK should contribute to ecological discourses and policies by working in tandem with 'modern' approaches to address current ecological issues.



*Figure 3: Ritual speakers preparing the WHL ritual*

My academic journey will take place in 13 more years, and doing research and publication are inseparable parts of the journey. In this era of ecological crises, doing research on folklore related to TEK is instrumental. Why? TEK is an action to reinvent human's natural and spiritual connections with nature (Shilling, 2018) and a rich source to understand philosophy and practice of sustainability (Kimmerer, 2018). As claimed by Berkes (Berkes, 2012), TEK can be a partner of scientific knowledge in addressing various and complex ecological issues at the present time. Therefore, in years to come, my researches will be in the area of TEK.

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### Author’s biodata



**B. Retang Wohangara** completed his undergraduate and Master’s in English Literature at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. In addition to being a lecturer teaching literary courses and a folklore class, he is, at the present time, a first-year graduate student at the Doctoral Study Program of Environmental Science, Soegijapranata Catholic University-Semarang. His researches mostly deal with verbal and customary folklore. His current research interest is in the area of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).