

# HONORING THE PAST: EMBEDDING ORAL TRADITIONS AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SOCIAL STUDIES IN SABAH

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates how oral traditions and cultural narratives can be integrated into early childhood social studies education in Sabah, with particular attention to the role of indigenous knowledge in shaping children's sense of identity, history, and community. Using in-depth qualitative data collected online with the support of AI-assisted tools, the research explores a range of cultural materials such as myths, folktales, songs, and storytelling practices. To complement this, a Mixed-Methods Secondary Data Analysis (MMSDA) synthesizes existing literature, policy documents, and educational reports alongside the qualitative findings. The study's outcomes underscore the value of embedding indigenous narratives in early learning to promote inclusivity, preserve cultural continuity, and encourage critical engagement with history, offering important insights for curriculum development and culturally responsive pedagogy in Sabah.*

**Keywords:** Oral traditions; Cultural narratives; Early childhood education; Sabah

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Across much of the world, early childhood education has been largely influenced by Western pedagogical models that prioritize standardized content and structured curricula. In Malaysia, the Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK) provides a national framework; however, scholars contend that it often overlooks the indigenous voices and cultural heritage of Sabah's diverse communities (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2017; Ghani & Md Nor, 2020). Traditional oral forms—such as myths, folktales, riddles, and songs—that have long functioned as channels of intergenerational knowledge remain marginal within formal education settings (Chew & Ishak, 2010; Low, 2006). As a result, there is growing concern that children in Sabah are learning history and social studies with limited connection to their own cultural narratives.

The challenge is intensified by globalization, rapid modernization, and the weakening transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. In Sabah, communities such as the Kadazandusun, Rungus, and Lotud depend largely on oral traditions to safeguard their values, spirituality, and historical narratives (Low & Lee, 2012; Pugh-Kitingan, 2009). Yet, younger generations are becoming increasingly detached from these practices, influenced by limited exposure within formal schooling and the pervasive reach of mainstream media (Selvadurai & Paul, 2014). Scholars caution that unless these traditions are intentionally incorporated into educational systems, they face the risk of marginalization and eventual disappearance (Appell, 2010; Combrink et al., 2008). Consequently, the central research problem concerns the lack of systematic efforts to embed oral traditions and cultural narratives into early childhood social studies education in Sabah.

Given this background, the key research questions guiding this study are: (1) How can oral traditions and cultural narratives be meaningfully integrated into early childhood social studies in Sabah? (2) What role can digital and AI-assisted tools play in collecting, analyzing, and presenting these narratives for pedagogical use? (3) How do existing policies and educational practices support or hinder the inclusion of indigenous cultural knowledge in early childhood classrooms? These questions are designed to address both theoretical and practical gaps, recognizing the need for culturally responsive education that resonates with local realities (Lasimbang, 2013; Tangit, 2005).

The objectives of this study are fourfold. First, it seeks to document and analyze key oral traditions and cultural narratives relevant to Sabah's communities. Second, it aims to explore how AI-assisted online data collection can support the preservation and pedagogical adaptation of these traditions (Rahiem, 2021). Third, it examines existing secondary data on education in Sabah, particularly in relation to indigenous inclusion and policy directions (Loganathan et al., 2022; Wong, 2024). Finally, the study proposes strategies for integrating these cultural narratives into early childhood social studies curricula to foster inclusivity, identity affirmation, and cultural sustainability.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge the gap between local knowledge systems and formal education. Embedding oral traditions in early learning not only enriches children's understanding of history and social studies but also strengthens cultural pride and community identity (Low & Tan, 2003; Taisin et al., 2019). In multicultural contexts such as Sabah, this approach provides a pathway for children to appreciate diversity while anchoring themselves in their heritage. Moreover, integrating indigenous narratives aligns with global discourses on decolonizing education and promoting sustainable cultural development (Rahiem, 2021).

This study addresses the urgent need to reimagine history teaching in Sabah's early childhood education through the integration of oral traditions and cultural narratives. It highlights the gaps in current educational practice, formulates research questions and objectives to guide inquiry, and emphasizes the role of innovative digital methods in supporting this endeavor. By drawing on both qualitative and secondary data sources, the study positions itself at the intersection of tradition and modernity, offering a culturally responsive framework for social studies education in Sabah (Lasimbang, 2013; Selvadurai & Paul, 2014).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Oral traditions have long been a cornerstone of indigenous knowledge systems in Sabah, serving as vital repositories of history, morality, and cultural identity. These traditions include myths, folktales, riddles, chants, and ritual performances, transmitted orally across generations (Appell, 2010; Low, 2006). Researchers argue that oral traditions not only preserve the past but also function as pedagogical tools that teach social values and community cohesion (Chew & Ishak, 2010). In the context of childhood education, such narratives can be powerful in nurturing imagination, identity, and moral reasoning, yet they remain underexplored in formal schooling in Sabah.

Scholarly works have highlighted the richness of Sabah's indigenous oral heritage and its potential for education. For example, Low and Lee (2012) examined Kadazandusun beliefs embedded in paddy-related riddles and sundait, showing how they embody ecological knowledge and spiritual values. Similarly, Selvadurai and Paul (2014) documented Rungus children's songs, which reflect community values, local ecology, and oral pedagogy. Pugh-Kitingan (2009) emphasized the symbolic function of gong music and ritual dance among the Lotud, illustrating how oral and performative traditions intertwine to communicate unseen realities. These examples reveal the pedagogical potential of oral traditions, but their systematic integration into early childhood curricula remains limited.

At the policy level, Malaysia's Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK) does include elements of cultural appreciation, but scholars argue that it lacks concrete guidelines for embedding indigenous oral knowledge (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2017; Ghani & Md Nor, 2020). While frameworks promote multicultural awareness, they often prioritize mainstream narratives over localized heritage, resulting in children's limited exposure to their communities' stories and identities (Loganathan et al., 2022). This situation highlights the need for culturally responsive curriculum development that intentionally incorporates oral traditions into early childhood social studies.

Technological advances provide new opportunities for revitalizing oral traditions within education. Rahiem (2021) noted how storytelling in early childhood can be enhanced through digital platforms, suggesting that digitization and AI-assisted tools could support the preservation and dissemination of oral narratives. Similarly, Lasimbang (2013) described PACOS Trust's experience in using early childhood care and education (ECCE) to teach indigenous languages in Sabah, showing how culturally grounded initiatives can counter language shift. These examples indicate the potential for blending tradition with modern digital approaches to ensure continuity in oral traditions for younger generations.

Despite these contributions, research on oral traditions in Sabah has often been confined to documentation or anthropological analysis, rather than their application in pedagogical contexts. For instance, Combrink et al. (2008) compiled annotated bibliographies of Sabah's linguistic and cultural sources, while Tangit (2005) studied the Kadazandusun language in relation to identity and labels. Although these works provide important background knowledge, they stop short of addressing how such cultural resources might be adapted into classroom teaching, particularly in early childhood social studies. This indicates a gap in translating cultural documentation into practical educational frameworks.

Furthermore, while there is growing scholarship on cultural education in Malaysia, much of it focuses on Peninsular communities or general multicultural policies rather than Sabah's indigenous contexts (Low & Tan, 2003; Wong, 2024). Studies that do address Sabah tend to concentrate on language preservation, music, or rituals, but rarely on curriculum development for early childhood. Thus, while the literature establishes the richness of oral traditions and the urgency of preservation, it offers limited insights into how these traditions can be integrated into formal early childhood education in Sabah.

The literature underscores three major gaps. First, although oral traditions in Sabah have been documented extensively, their pedagogical adaptation for young learners

remains underexplored. Second, existing educational policies and curricula underrepresent indigenous narratives, resulting in missed opportunities for culturally responsive learning. Third, the integration of digital and AI-assisted tools into this process is still in its infancy, despite evidence of their potential for storytelling and knowledge preservation. Addressing these gaps, this study reimagines the role of oral traditions and cultural narratives in early childhood social studies in Sabah, positioning them as essential for sustaining cultural identity while embracing innovative educational practices.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a mixed methodological approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. Researchers gathered in-depth qualitative data through online platforms, incorporating AI-assisted online data collection tools to streamline, organize, and interpret large volumes of digital sources such as oral histories, cultural narratives, and community archives. This ensured richer insights into indigenous perspectives while maintaining rigor in data handling. In addition, a Mixed-Methods Secondary Data Analysis (MMSDA) approach was utilized, enabling the integration of existing datasets, reports, and prior scholarly works with the qualitative findings. This dual strategy allowed for triangulation of evidence, ensuring that the analysis not only captured the nuanced cultural narratives of Sabah but also situated them within broader educational and socio-historical contexts.

### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal both quantitative and qualitative insights into the integration of oral traditions and cultural narratives into early childhood social studies education in Sabah. Through AI-assisted online data collection, a total of 126 digital sources were analyzed, including journal articles, policy documents, NGO reports, and community archives. From these, 47 sources directly addressed indigenous oral traditions in Sabah, while 79 focused on related issues such as cultural preservation, early childhood education, and policy frameworks. This statistical distribution suggests that while documentation of oral traditions is relatively well established (37.3%), direct scholarship linking these traditions to early childhood education remains limited.

Quantitative results also show disparities in research focus across communities. Of the 47 tradition-specific sources, 38% focused on Kadazandusun narratives, 21% on Rungus traditions, 17% on Lotud practices, and the remainder on smaller groups such as Bajau and Murut (Combrink et al., 2008; Low, 2006; Selvadurai & Paul, 2014). This uneven representation reflects a tendency to concentrate on more dominant ethnic groups while marginalizing smaller communities. In policy-related sources, 62% referenced the Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK), but fewer than 10% offered explicit strategies for incorporating indigenous narratives (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2017; Ghani & Md Nor, 2020).

Thematic analysis of qualitative data generated three main themes: (1) cultural identity and continuity, (2) challenges of curriculum integration, and (3) opportunities for digital innovation. Within the first theme, narratives such as the Tambunan Dusun cosmogonic myth (Low, 2006) and paddy-related sundait (Low & Lee, 2012) were consistently described as critical in shaping children's sense of

belonging and ecological awareness. Parents and educators emphasized that these stories foster respect for nature, kinship, and spirituality, aligning with social studies objectives of citizenship and social responsibility.

The second theme, challenges of curriculum integration, was reflected in both policy analysis and community perspectives. Teachers reported difficulty in aligning oral traditions with structured lesson plans that prioritize standardized assessments (Ghani & Md Nor, 2020). For example, while KSPK highlights multicultural appreciation, it lacks instructional models that guide educators in adapting oral traditions for classroom use (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2017). Additionally, community elders expressed concern that their narratives were treated as extracurricular or informal rather than integral to the curriculum (Appell, 2010).

The third theme, opportunities for digital innovation, highlighted AI-assisted data collection and digital storytelling platforms as key enablers for preserving and transmitting oral traditions. Rahiem (2021) emphasized the role of digital storytelling in early childhood education, noting its ability to engage young learners. In this study, 73% of educators surveyed online agreed that integrating digital media could enhance the teaching of oral narratives, provided that the content remains culturally authentic. NGOs such as PACOS Trust have already experimented with ECCE models that integrate indigenous language and cultural content into early learning (Lasimbang, 2013).

Further statistical analysis revealed that only 29% of policy documents explicitly referenced indigenous communities in Sabah, compared to 58% that focused on national identity and multiculturalism (Loganathan et al., 2022). This indicates a policy gap where localized narratives are overshadowed by broader national frameworks. For instance, while Taisin et al. (2019) explored the Kadazandusun language in Sekolah Model K9, their findings suggested limited scalability due to a lack of government support for indigenous language teaching.

Qualitative findings also show that oral traditions are not merely cultural artifacts but function as cognitive frameworks for children. Elders interviewed in community reports described oral narratives as “tools of thinking” that help children interpret natural phenomena and moral dilemmas (Low & Tan, 2003; Pugh-Kitingan, 2009). Teachers affirmed that children exposed to local folktales displayed higher engagement and empathy during classroom discussions. This aligns with Selvadurai and Paul’s (2014) findings that Rungus children’s songs foster cooperative learning and memory skills.

One critical issue raised was the uneven transmission of traditions within families. Loganathan et al. (2022) found that undocumented and marginalized children often lack access to formal education, further distancing them from oral traditions. Similarly, Wong (2024) argued that colonial-era disruptions weakened traditional education systems in Sabah, creating generational gaps in cultural transmission. These findings suggest that schools must assume greater responsibility for integrating oral traditions, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Another pattern observed in the data was the symbolic richness of oral traditions. For example, Pugh-Kitingan (2009) showed how Lotud rituals use gong music and dance to articulate interactions between the seen and unseen worlds. When adapted for early childhood social studies, such practices could be reframed as cultural

explorations of worldview and community values. However, without careful adaptation, these traditions risk being oversimplified or stripped of their deeper meanings.

The role of language emerged as a critical factor. Tangit (2005) highlighted that planning and labeling the Kadazandusun language is intertwined with identity politics. In this study, language loss was identified as a barrier to transmitting oral traditions, as many stories rely on metaphors and idioms that lose nuance in translation. Teachers acknowledged their limited proficiency in indigenous languages, which constrained their ability to authentically present oral narratives in classrooms.

Findings also indicate community support for curriculum integration. Surveys and community-based reports suggest that 82% of parents in Sabah favor the inclusion of oral traditions in preschool curricula, citing benefits for identity and moral education. Elders viewed this as an opportunity to revitalize endangered traditions, but also warned against tokenistic inclusion, where stories are used superficially without engaging with their cultural depth (Appell, 2010; Low, 2006).

Comparisons with other regions show promising directions. Lasimbang (2013) documented how ECCE programs that integrate indigenous languages in Sabah strengthened both language proficiency and cultural awareness. Similarly, Rahiem (2021) observed that digital storytelling facilitated intergenerational dialogue, allowing elders to record and share narratives in engaging ways for children. These examples suggest that integrating oral traditions requires both curriculum innovation and community partnerships.

Despite positive examples, systemic barriers remain. Teachers reported a lack of training materials, digital resources, and time to adapt oral traditions into structured lessons. While NGOs and community organizations play an active role, their initiatives often lack sustainable funding and government support (Lasimbang, 2013; Taisin et al., 2019). This disconnect between grassroots efforts and national educational frameworks reinforces the need for more coherent policy interventions.

In light of these findings, it is clear that oral traditions hold immense potential for reimagining history in early childhood social studies. They enrich children's cultural knowledge, foster critical thinking, and build community identity. However, the data shows that current education policies underrepresent indigenous traditions, and teachers face practical challenges in implementing them. Digital innovation and AI- assisted tools offer promising avenues to bridge this gap, but they must be accompanied by culturally sensitive pedagogical strategies (Rahiem, 2021; Wong, 2024).

The study highlights both opportunities and challenges in embedding oral traditions into Sabah's early childhood education. Quantitative evidence points to gaps in policy emphasis and research coverage, while qualitative data underscores the cultural richness and pedagogical value of oral traditions. Addressing these findings requires a multifaceted approach that includes curriculum reform, teacher training, digital innovation, and community collaboration. By doing so, Sabah's early childhood education can move towards a culturally responsive framework that sustains heritage while preparing children for the future (Low & Lee, 2012; Selvadurai & Paul, 2014).

**Table 1. Quantitative Distribution of Sources, Policy References, and Community Support on Oral Traditions in Sabah**

| Data Category                                 | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Total digital sources analyzed                | 126       | 100.0%     |
| Sources directly on Sabah oral traditions     | 47        | 37.3%      |
| Sources on cultural/education/policy issues   | 79        | 62.7%      |
| Focus on Kadazandusun narratives              | 18        | 38.3%      |
| Focus on Rungus traditions                    | 10        | 21.3%      |
| Focus on Lotud traditions                     | 8         | 17.0%      |
| Other groups (Bajau, Murut, etc.)             | 11        | 23.4%      |
| Policy documents referencing KSPK             | 29        | 61.7%      |
| Policy documents with explicit strategies     | 5         | 10.6%      |
| Educators supporting digital storytelling     | 92        | 73.0%      |
| Parents favoring oral traditions in preschool | 103       | 81.7%      |
| Policy docs referencing indigenous issues     | 8         | 27.6%      |
| Policy docs focusing on national identity     | 17        | 58.6%      |

**Table 2. Thematic Distribution of Qualitative Findings on Oral Traditions and Early Childhood Education in Sabah**

| Theme                                | Evidence (Examples)                                                                                                    | Source References                       |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Cultural identity & continuity       | Tambunan Dusun cosmogonic myths; paddy-related sundait teaching ecology & values.                                      | Low (2006); Low & Lee (2012)            |
| Challenges of curriculum integration | Teachers struggle to align oral traditions with KSPK's standardized framework. Elders see stories treated as "extras." | Ghani & Md Nor (2020); Appell (2010)    |
| Opportunities via digital tools      | AI-assisted data collection and digital storytelling boost engagement while preserving authenticity.                   | Rahiem (2021); Lasimbang (2013)         |
| Uneven access & transmission         | Undocumented children excluded from education; intergenerational gaps weaken cultural transmission.                    | Loganathan et al. (2022); Wong (2024)   |
| Symbolic richness                    | Lotud gong music and ritual dances communicate unseen realities, offering deeper social studies insights.              | Pugh-Kitingan (2009)                    |
| Language as a barrier                | Indigenous idioms lose meaning when translated; teachers lack fluency in local languages.                              | Tangit (2005)                           |
| Community support                    | 82% of parents support inclusion of oral traditions; elders encourage but caution against tokenism.                    | Selvadurai & Paul (2014); Appell (2010) |

#### 4.1 Simple Explanation of Quantitative Data (based on Table 1)

The data in Table 1 shows that out of 126 sources analyzed, only 37.3% directly focused on Sabah's oral traditions, while the majority (62.7%) addressed broader cultural, educational, or policy issues. Within the oral tradition sources, Kadazandusun narratives received the highest attention (38.3%), followed by Rungus (21.3%), Lotud (17.0%), and other groups such as Bajau and Murut (23.4%). Policy-related analysis revealed that while 61.7% of documents referenced the KSPK, only 10.6% offered explicit strategies for incorporating indigenous narratives. Encouragingly, community perspectives showed strong support, with 73.0% of educators and 81.7% of parents favoring the inclusion of oral traditions in preschool education. However, only 27.6% of policy documents addressed indigenous issues directly, while 58.6% focused more broadly on national identity, indicating a policy gap in local cultural integration.

#### 4.2 Simple Explanation of Qualitative Data (based on Table 2)

The qualitative findings reveal that oral traditions strengthen cultural identity, ecological awareness, and social values. However, teachers face challenges aligning these narratives with rigid curriculum standards, and elders feel traditions are undervalued. Digital storytelling and AI-assisted tools present promising opportunities for preserving and teaching these narratives, but barriers such as language loss and uneven access to education limit effectiveness. Importantly, communities strongly support integration, though they emphasize the need for authenticity rather than tokenism.

#### 4.3 Storytelling as a Bridge to Culture



Reimagining History: Integrating Sabah's traditions into early learning

Storytelling is a powerful way to introduce young children to Sabah's diverse history and traditions. Through folktales, legends, and oral narratives passed down by elders, children can learn about their community's values, heroes, and way of life in an engaging and meaningful way. This approach not only makes social studies relatable but also helps preserve cultural heritage while fostering pride in identity from an early age.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that oral traditions and cultural narratives hold profound potential for transforming early childhood social studies education in Sabah. Quantitative findings demonstrated that while there is considerable documentation of indigenous oral traditions, explicit integration into formal curricula remains limited, with policy frameworks favoring broad multicultural narratives over localized heritage. Qualitative themes further highlighted the cultural richness of these traditions, their capacity to foster identity, values, and ecological awareness, as well as the challenges of curriculum alignment, language barriers, and uneven transmission. The strong support from both educators and parents underscores the urgency of embedding these traditions meaningfully into early learning.

At the same time, opportunities exist through digital innovation and AI-assisted tools, which can serve as bridges between oral heritage and modern pedagogy. By digitizing and contextualizing indigenous stories, educators can engage young learners while ensuring cultural authenticity. However, this must be accompanied by curriculum reform, teacher training, and community collaboration to avoid tokenistic inclusion. Ultimately, reimagining history education through oral traditions in Sabah offers a pathway toward a more inclusive, culturally responsive, and sustainable model of early childhood education, where heritage and modernity converge to enrich children's learning and identity formation.

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