PROCEEDINGS
International Conference on Literature
Himpunan Sarjana-Kesusastraan Indonesia (HISKI)
E-ISSN 2988-4357

Polygenesis and the celestial maiden in Torajan and Korean folktales

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Abstract: *Tales of a mortal man who marries a celestial maiden (the "swan maiden" complex, ATU 400) are attested from Europe to East Asia and across Indonesia, raising the question whether such resemblances reflect diffusion or independent invention (polygenesis). This study compares the Torajan Polo Padang (To Manurung) with the Korean Seonnyeowa Namukkun ("The Woodcutter and the Heavenly Maiden"). Using a qualitative comparative-descriptive design, the texts were segmented into sixteen narrative units, coded with the Thompson and ATU indexes, and interpreted through a microcosm–mesocosm–macrocosm framework. Both share a generic core: descending celestial maidens, a lost garment, a hierogamous marriage, the wife's return to heaven, and the husband's ascent. Yet every culturally distinctive motif differs. The Torajan tale turns on a speech tabu and ends with the family descending to found a noble lineage, whereas the Korean tale ends in permanent separation driven by filial longing. With no shared distinctive motifs or plausible contact route, polygenesis best explains the resemblance. The Torajan tale legitimises social order through cosmic descent and ethical speech, while its Korean counterpart dramatises the tension between conjugal and filial loyalty. The study adds an Indonesia–Korea perspective and a replicable model for microcosmic comparison.*

Keywords: *celestial maiden, comparative folklore, Korean folktale, polygenesis, Torajan folklore*

INTRODUCTION

The term "folklore" was coined by William John Thoms in 1846 to designate the tales, legends, ballads, proverbs, superstitions, and other forms of expression circulating orally within a community (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2021). Thoms drew on the example of the Brothers Grimm and the German notion of *Volkskunde*. In Indonesian scholarship the term is commonly rendered as *cerita rakyat* ("folk tale"), although Danandjaja (1986) deliberately retained the loanword *folklor* to signal the broader scope of the field, which encompasses verbal, partly verbal, and non-verbal traditions. Folklore matters because it records how communities explain the world and themselves; as Dundes argued, it offers an "autobiographical ethnography" that allows scholars to see a culture "from the inside out" (Bronner, 2007). Studies of Indonesian literature have likewise shown that literary texts, oral and written, are principal carriers of cultural values (Sari et al., 2021; Sari & Nurhayati, 2022).

Among the most widespread narratives in world folklore is the tale of a mortal man who obtains a supernatural wife by seizing her feathered cloak, wings, or garment, loses her when she recovers it, and sometimes follows her to the other world. Classified as the "swan maiden" motif (D361.1) in Thompson's (1955–1958) *Motif-Index* and as tale type ATU 400, "The Man on a Quest for His Lost Wife" (Uther, 2004), the narrative has been documented across northern Eurasia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe (Hatto, 1961; Leavy, 1994). Scholars disagree about its origin. Hatto (1961) proposed a northern Eurasian point of origin followed by diffusion, whereas others read the

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How to cite (APA 7th): Sari, H., & Suriaty. (2026). Polygenesis and the celestial maiden in Torajan and Korean folktales. *Proceedings 35th KIK, 35,* 558–571. https://doi.org/10.68634/kik.v35i.120

recurrence of the motif as evidence of shared human preoccupations with marriage, gender, and the boundary between the human and the divine (Leavy, 1994; Wiyatmi, 2021).

This disagreement reflects a broader theoretical opposition between monogenesis and polygenesis. Monogenesis assumes that a narrative form arose once and then spread through diffusion and cultural contact; polygenesis holds that similar forms can arise independently in different places because they respond to similar human experiences (Danandjaja, 1986, p. 56; Jorgensen, 2015). Jorgensen (2015) cautions that simple plots, such as unrequited love or a "rags-to-riches" rise, can emerge wherever the social conditions to sustain them exist, whereas a narrative that accumulates many distinctive motifs is more likely to have originated at a particular point and spread. Deciding between the two explanations therefore requires attention not to similarity in general but to the specific, culturally marked details of each version.

Indonesia is especially rich in celestial-maiden narratives. Atisah, as cited in Wiyatmi (2021, p. 41), identified twenty-six Indonesian folktales in which a celestial maiden (*bidadari*) marries an earthly man, the best known being the Javanese legend of Jaka Tarub. Existing Indonesian studies, however, have concentrated on intranational comparison or on feminist readings of these tales (Wiyatmi, 2021). Korean scholarship on *Seonnyeowa Namukkun ("The Woodcutter and the Heavenly Maiden*") has compared the tale mainly with Japanese and Chinese variants (Kim, 2007) or examined its afterlife in modern fiction and education (King, 2005; Yang, 2024). Research on Torajan verbal art, meanwhile, has focused on ritual texts, such as the *ma'parapa* discourse and the speech acts of the *rampanan kapa'* wedding ceremony (Nurhayati et al., 2025; Sari & Maming, 2019; Sari & Nurhayati, 2022), rather than on Torajan myth in a cross-cultural frame. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no study has compared a Torajan celestial-maiden narrative with a Korean one.

This study addresses that gap by comparing the Torajan tale of Polo Padang, known as *To Manurung* ("the one who descended [from heaven]"), with the Korean *Woodcutter and the Heavenly Maiden*. It asks three questions: (1) What narrative units and motifs do the two tales share, and where do they diverge? (2) Is their resemblance better explained by diffusion or by polygenesis? (3) What worldview does each tale encode when read as a cultural microcosm? The study contributes to comparative folkloristics in two ways. Empirically, it adds a Torajan–Korean pairing to a scholarship dominated by European and intra-East Asian comparisons. Methodologically, it combines motif and tale-type coding with a three-level microcosm framework derived from cultural semiotics (Grzybek, 1994), offering a model that can be applied to other cross-cultural pairs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Folklore, Meaning, and Worldview: Dundes and Danandjaja

Alan Dundes, whose essays are collected in Bronner (2007), argued that the task of folkloristics is not merely to collect and classify texts but to uncover their meaning. He proposed a method integrating text and context and criticised the long dominance of diachronic research, which reconstructed "original" forms of the lore while neglecting the folk who transmit it. For Dundes, structural analysis, inspired by Propp's (1968) morphology of narrative functions, was a means to define and compare genres and,

more importantly, to reveal worldview. He proposed that worldview can be approached through "folk ideas," the unstated assumptions about the nature of humans, society, and the cosmos that underlie traditional expression (Bronner, 2007).

Danandjaja (1986) identified several characteristics of folklore that are directly relevant to this study. Folklore is transmitted orally or by example and therefore exists in multiple versions; it is anonymous and collectively owned; it serves functions such as education, consolation, social protest, and the projection of repressed desires; and it is often "pre-logical," following an internal logic that differs from everyday reasoning. The marriage of a celestial being to a mortal is a clear instance of such pre-logical narrative. Variation is also central to the present corpus, since the Polo Padang tale circulates in several versions that differ in significant details (Lapu, 2015; Tangdilintin, 1980).

Comparative Literature: Remak and Bassnett

Remak (1961) defined comparative literature as the study of literature beyond the confines of one country and of the relationships between literature and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts, philosophy, religion, and the social sciences. His definition, associated with the American school, broadened the field beyond the French school's emphasis on documented influence (*rapports de fait*). This distinction is essential here: because no historical contact between Toraja and Korea can be documented, the comparison is necessarily one of analogy rather than influence. In the Indonesian context, comparative study has also been applied within the archipelago itself (Damono, 2009), reflecting the fact that a single nation-state may contain many literary traditions.

Bassnett (1993) criticised traditional comparative literature for its Eurocentric focus on a canon of Western texts and argued for a shift towards translation studies and towards non-Western and postcolonial perspectives. For Bassnett, translation is not a mechanical substitution of words but a culturally charged act through which texts travel and acquire new meanings. Both points apply here. The study compares two non-European traditions without routing the comparison through a Western model, and both texts are accessed through translation, from Torajan and from Korean into Indonesian, which introduces a layer of mediation that must be acknowledged.

Microcosm, Mesocosm, and Macrocosm

The idea of the microcosm holds that the human being, or a bounded human world, mirrors the order of the cosmos. Grzybek (1994) reframed this old analogy in semiotic terms, distinguishing the microcosm (the individual and the body), the mesocosm (the human-scale world of society and everyday experience), and the macrocosm (the universe). Drawing on Koch's principle of the "search for metagenetic analogies" (Koch, 1986, as cited in Grzybek, 1994, p. 121), Grzybek observed that humans first describe the world from an anthropocentric standpoint, which is why many etiological myths present the origin of the cosmos as the creative act of anthropomorphic beings. The same observation explains why narratives of celestial marriage are productive: they represent the relationship between heaven and earth through the most familiar human relationship, marriage. In this study, the three levels serve as an analytical grid. Each tale is read for what it says about the individual body

and speech (micro), the household and community (meso), and the order of the cosmos (macro).

Previous Studies of the Celestial-Maiden Tale

The swan-maiden complex has attracted sustained scholarly attention. Hatto (1961) mapped its distribution across northern Eurasia and argued for a single point of origin. Leavy (1994) read the tale as a narrative about gender, in which the captured wife's recovery of her garment expresses female autonomy and the husband's quest dramatises male dependence. The marriage between a divine and a human partner has also been studied as *hieros gamos* or hierogamy, a sacred union that links the human and divine orders (Eliade, 1958; Nissinen & Uro, 2008). In Indonesia, Wiyatmi (2021) analysed celestial-maiden marriages across Javanese, Papuan, Malukan, and Kalimantan traditions and concluded that the celestial wife, who possesses higher status and power than her earthly husband, reflects a cultural esteem for the mother as ancestor. In Korea, Kim (2007) discussed the problems of comparing Korean and Japanese swan-maiden tales, King (2005) traced the reworking of the tale in contemporary Korean fiction, and Yang (2024) used it to elicit philosophical questions from Korean adolescents. None of these studies considers a Torajan version, and none compares an Indonesian and a Korean version directly.

METHOD

Research Design

This qualitative study adopts a comparative-descriptive design in the tradition of the American school of comparative literature (Remak, 1961). Because no historical contact between the two cultures can be demonstrated, the comparison is analogical: it identifies parallels and differences and interprets them in relation to each culture's worldview, rather than tracing lines of influence.

The Torajan corpus is the tale of Polo Padang in the version retold by Khairiah (2016) and published by Indonesia's Agency for Language Development and Cultivation (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa) as part of the national literacy movement, which served as the primary text. Two further versions, Tangdilintin (1980) and Lapu (2015), were consulted to identify variation. The Korean corpus is *Seonnyeowa Namukkun* ("The Woodcutter and the Heavenly Maiden"), read in the Indonesian retelling "Pengumpul Kayu dan Bidadari" ("The Woodgatherer and the Heavenly Maiden") in Wahyudi's (2014) collection of Korean folktales. The version published by the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS, 2014) and other published versions (Grayson, 2001; Yang, 2024) were consulted for comparison. The two texts were selected purposively because they share the theme of a marriage between a celestial maiden and a mortal man and because each is a well-known representative of its tradition.

Procedure of Analysis

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each tale was segmented into narrative units following the sequence of events, and the units were aligned in a comparative table (Table 1). Second, the recurrent elements were coded with Thompson's (1955–1958) motif index and located within tale type ATU 400 (Uther, 2004) (Table 2). Third, the question of diffusion versus polygenesis was assessed using the criterion proposed by Jorgensen (2015): shared generic motifs do not indicate contact, whereas shared distinctive, culturally marked motifs would. Fourth, each tale was interpreted at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Grzybek, 1994) to identify the worldview it encodes (Table 3). To strengthen the reliability of the interpretation, the readings were checked against the variant versions and against ethnographic literature on Toraja (Pelras, 1996; Waterson, 2009) and on Korean folklore (Grayson, 2001; King, 2005).

Limitations

Both tales exist in many versions, and the conclusions apply primarily to the versions analysed. Moreover, the texts were analysed in translation, so wordplay and culturally specific terms in the source languages may not be fully captured. These limitations are addressed by consulting multiple versions and by relying on ethnographic sources for cultural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Narrative Sequence

The two tales share a similar opening but diverge in their development and conclusion. Table 1 aligns their narrative units.

Table 1. Comparison of Narrative Units in To Manurung and The Woodcutter and the Heavenly Maiden

No.	Narrative unit	To Manurung (Toraja)	Woodcutter and Heavenly Maiden (Korea)
1	Celestial maidens descend to the earthly realm	Three celestial maidens descend at night to pick fruit in Polo Padang's garden.	Celestial maidens descend at night to a mountain lake.
2	The maidens bathe	— (in other Torajan variants, seven or several maidens bathe in a pool on Polo Padang's land; Lapu, 2015)	The maidens bathe in the lake.
3	Acquisition of the celestial garment	The shawl of the youngest maiden (Putri Bungsu) slips to the ground while she picks fruit and is picked up by Polo Padang.	Guided by a deer he has saved from a hunter, the woodcutter deliberately hides one maiden's garment.
4	The stranded maiden's dilemma	Unable to fly, Putri Bungsu is offered a choice: work in the garden or marry Polo Padang.	Unable to return, the maiden has no alternative but to become the woodcutter's wife.
5	The garment is disclosed	Polo Padang openly shows her the shawl he is holding.	—
6	Consent to marriage	Polo Padang will return the shawl only if she marries him.	She agrees, moved by the woodcutter's account of his poverty and loneliness.
7	Condition (tabu) of the marriage	Putri Bungsu stipulates that Polo Padang must never curse or use harsh language.	Implicit: in widely circulated versions, the deer warns him not to reveal the garment before a third child is born (KOCIS, 2014).
8	Attempted return blocked by the celestial father	Putri Bungsu wishes to return, but her father forbids it because she has behaved improperly.	—
9	Birth of offspring	A son, Pairunan, is born.	Two children are born.
10	Disclosure of the theft	—	After two children, the woodcutter judges it safe to reveal the hidden garment.
11	Violation of the tabu	Pairunan's golden spinning top strikes Polo Padang's head; in pain he curses, breaking the pact, and Putri Bungsu returns to heaven with the child.	—
12	The garment restored; the wife ascends	—	Yielding to her pleas, the woodcutter shows her the garment; she puts it on and ascends with both children.
13	The husband's ascent	Assisted by a white buffalo, the moon, and the stars, Polo Padang reaches the celestial realm.	The woodcutter ascends in a bucket lowered nightly from heaven into the lake.
14	Reunion	—	He is received and reunited with his wife and children.
15	Trials in the celestial realm	The celestial father sets impossible tasks, completed with the help of an eel, a sparrow, a strong wind, and other allies; the family is then permitted to descend to earth as To Manurung.	—
16	Longing for the earthly mother; final separation	—	Longing for his mother, he visits earth on a flying horse; hot porridge spills on the horse, which bolts, and he can never return to heaven.

Note. Torajan units are based on Khairiah (2016); Korean units on Wahyudi (2014). "—" = the unit does not occur in the version analysed.

Table 1 shows that seven of the sixteen units are present in both tales (units 1, 3, 4, 6, 9, 13, and, in modified form, the wife's return to heaven in units 11–12). The remaining units are unique to one tradition. The Torajan tale contains the explicit marital condition (unit 7), the father's refusal to take his daughter back (unit 8), the broken speech tabu (unit 11), and the trials in heaven (unit 15). The Korean tale contains the disclosure of the theft (unit 10), the reunion in heaven (unit 14), and the husband's longing for his mother (unit 16).

Motif Inventory

Table 2. Principal Motifs Coded With the Thompson Motif-Index

Motif	Code	To Manurung (Toraja)	Woodcutter (Korea)
Swan (celestial) maiden	D361.1	Present	Present
Fairy comes into man's power when he takes her wings/clothing	F302.4.2	Present (accidental)	Present (deliberate)
Wooing by stealing clothes of bathing girl	K1335	Absent in corpus version; present in other variants	Present
Grateful animal as helper/informant	B350	Absent	Present (deer)
Tabu: offending supernatural wife	C31	Present (speech tabu: cursing)	Implicit (premature return of the garment)
Return to the other world after broken tabu	C952	Present	Present
Journey to the upper world by magic conveyance	F10–F68	Buffalo, moon, stars	Bucket lowered from heaven; flying horse
Quest for the vanished wife	H1385.3	Present	Present
Tasks set by the supernatural father-in-law	H335	Present	Absent in corpus version
Animals perform tasks for man	B571	Present (eel, sparrow)	Absent
Divine descent founding a lineage (To Manurung)	—	Present	Absent
Separation caused by longing for kin on earth	—	Absent	Present (mother)

Note. Codes follow Thompson (1955–1958); both tales belong to tale type ATU 400 (Uther, 2004). "—" = no single code captures the motif.

The motif inventory confirms that both tales belong to tale type ATU 400. What they share, however, is the generic core of the type: the celestial maiden, the loss of her garment, the enforced marriage, her return to heaven, and the husband's quest. The culturally distinctive motifs, including the speech tabu, the golden spinning top, the white buffalo, the tasks set by the celestial father, the founding of a lineage, the grateful deer, the bucket from heaven, the hot porridge, and the earthly mother, are unique to one tale.

Key Divergences

The manner of the union. The two marriages arise from different intentions. Polo Padang did not seek a celestial wife: the youngest maiden's shawl fell to the ground while she was absorbed in picking fruit and joking with her sisters. The woodcutter, by contrast, acts on the advice of a deer he had rescued, deliberately climbs to the lake where the maidens bathe at night, and hides a garment to prevent one of them from returning to heaven. In both tales the maidens descend at night, and neither specifies how they travel, whether on beams of moonlight, by another conveyance, or by the power of their garments alone. This contrasts with the Javanese Jaka Tarub legend, in which the maidens descend by a rainbow and bathe in daylight (Wiyatmi, 2021).

The nature of the tabu. In the Torajan tale the marriage rests on an explicit verbal contract: Polo Padang must never curse or use harsh words. The tabu is broken when Pairunan's golden spinning top strikes his father's head and Polo Padang swears in pain. In the Korean tale the prohibition concerns the concealed garment; in widely circulated versions, the deer warns the woodcutter not to reveal it before the birth of a third child (KOCIS, 2014). The woodcutter reveals the garment after only two children, and the wife ascends with both of them.

The role of the children. Polo Padang's only son is the direct, if innocent, cause of the separation. In the Korean tale the children have no agency in the plot; the wife's departure is motivated by longing for her celestial family and by the discovery that her husband has hidden her garment.

The reception in heaven. The woodcutter's wife displays greater attachment to her husband than Putri Bungsu does. She welcomes him to heaven, recognises his longing for his mother, and provides a flying horse so that he may visit her, which signals that he has been accepted into the celestial family. Polo Padang, by contrast, is not welcomed: his wife initially hides their child from him, and her father scolds him and imposes a series of trials that are, in effect, impossible. He completes them only with the help of an eel, a sparrow, a strong wind, and other allies.

The ending. The tales conclude in opposite directions. Polo Padang's family is reconciled with the celestial father and permitted to descend to earth as To Manurung, the heaven-descended founders of a lineage. The woodcutter, on his visit to his mother, is thrown when hot porridge spills on the flying horse, and he can never return to heaven. In many Korean versions he is transformed into a rooster that crows towards the sky (King, 2005; KOCIS, 2014; Yang, 2024).

Discussion

Diffusion or Polygenesis?

The findings support a polygenetic explanation of the resemblance between the two tales. Following Jorgensen (2015), shared generic plot elements are weak evidence of contact because they can arise wherever similar social and imaginative conditions exist. The elements the tales share, namely a supernatural wife, a lost garment, an enforced marriage, and a separation, form the generic core of ATU 400 and are distributed across Eurasia and the Austronesian world (Hatto, 1961; Leavy, 1994; Uther, 2004). By contrast, none of the culturally distinctive motifs recurs in both tales, and each distinctive motif is firmly anchored in local material culture, social organisation, or ethics (Tables 1–3). There is also no documented route of contact between Toraja, an

upland society in South Sulawesi, and Korea through which a narrative could have passed.

It must be acknowledged that polygenesis and deep diffusion are difficult to separate for a tale type as ancient and widespread as ATU 400. Hatto's (1961) diffusionist hypothesis would situate Korea within the northern Eurasian distribution of the tale, and Austronesian versions may share a much older common ancestor. The claim made here is therefore a limited one: at the level of the two versions analysed, the similarities do not exceed what a shared human imagination of heaven, marriage, and loss would produce, whereas the differences are systematic and culture-specific. This is the pattern that Jorgensen (2015) associates with polygenesis, and it accords with Dundes's insistence that the meaning of a tale lies less in its putative origin than in what it does for those who tell it (Bronner, 2007).

The Torajan Tale as Microcosm: Descent, Hierarchy, and Ethical Speech

At the macro level, the Torajan tale is cosmogonic and genealogical. In South Sulawesi, the figure of the *tomanurung* (Torajan *to manurun*), a being who descends from the upper world, is the classic charter for the origin of noble lineages and the legitimacy of rule (Pelras, 1996). In Toraja, aristocratic houses trace their descent to ancestors who came down from heaven (Waterson, 2009). The ending of the Polo Padang tale, in which the family descends to earth as To Manurung, thus links the social hierarchy of the mesocosm to the order of the macrocosm. The celestial father's initial rejection and subsequent approval of Polo Padang function as a narrative of legitimation: the union of an earthly man and a celestial woman becomes acceptable only after he has proven himself, and it is this tested union that founds a lineage.

At the micro level, the tale places ethical speech at the centre of the cosmic contract. Polo Padang loses his wife not because of theft or deceit but because of a curse uttered in pain. The significance of this motif becomes clearer when read alongside Torajan ceremonial discourse. Studies of the *ma'parapa* text recited in the *rampanan kapa'* wedding ceremony show that politeness, humility, and gratitude are the core moral values it transmits (Sari & Maming, 2019), that these values continue to function for families and kin groups (Sari & Nurhayati, 2022), and that ritual speech acts regulate social relations and mark the legitimacy of a marriage (Nurhayati et al., 2025). The Polo Padang tale expresses the same folk idea in mythic form: in Torajan thought, a marriage is sustained by controlled and respectful speech, and a single harsh word can sever the bond between the human and the divine. The environment of the tale, including the fruit garden, the white buffalo that carries Polo Padang skyward, and the eel and sparrow that help him, likewise reflects the agrarian world and the high value placed on the buffalo in Torajan life (Waterson, 2009).

The Korean Tale as Microcosm: The Household, Filial Longing, and an Irreversible Boundary

The Korean tale centres on the household rather than the lineage. The woodcutter is a poor, unmarried man who lives with his mother, and his motive for acquiring a wife is personal rather than dynastic. At the meso level, the tale dramatises the competing claims of conjugal and filial loyalty. The heavenly wife is sympathetic: she welcomes her husband, understands his longing, and allows him to visit his mother. Yet the husband's filial attachment draws him back to earth and costs him heaven. Read against the high value placed on filial piety in Korean culture, the ending may be interpreted as the victory of the mother's claim over that of the wife, a tension that Korean readers continue to debate (Yang, 2024).

At the micro level, the decisive failure is not a word but a desire: the woodcutter cannot give up his longing for his mother. At the macro level, the ending establishes an irreversible boundary between heaven and earth. The husband, fallen from the flying horse, remains on earth, and in versions in which he becomes a rooster, his daily crowing towards the sky becomes an etiological explanation of a familiar sound (King, 2005; Yang, 2024). The material details of the tale, such as firewood, the deer, the mountain lake, the bucket lowered from heaven, and the bowl of hot porridge, locate the cosmic drama within the everyday world of a Korean farming household. As Table 3 shows, both tales use the same cosmological scheme of an upper and a middle world, but they draw opposite conclusions: the Torajan tale reconnects the worlds, whereas the Korean tale separates them.

Table 3. Micro-, Meso-, and Macrocosmic Readings of the Two Tales

Level	To Manurung (Toraja)	Woodcutter (Korea)
Micro (body, speech, desire)	The uncontrolled word: a curse uttered in pain breaks the cosmic contract. Ethical speech sustains the marriage.	The uncontrolled longing: attachment to the mother draws the husband earthward and costs him heaven.
Meso (household, kin, community)	The celestial father tests and finally legitimises the union; the family becomes the founding kin group of the To Manurung.	The household is nuclear and affective; the wife mediates between her celestial kin and her husband's earthly mother.
Macro (cosmos)	Upper and middle worlds are reconnected through descent; the narrative grounds social hierarchy in cosmic origin.	Upper and middle worlds remain separated; the ending marks an irreversible boundary between heaven and earth.
Material culture / environment	Garden fruit, golden spinning top, white buffalo (tedong bulan), eel, sparrow.	Firewood, deer, mountain lake, bucket (well culture), hot porridge, horse.

Note. Analytical levels follow Grzybek (1994).

The Logic of the Impossible

Folktales emerge and evolve within societies that seek both reinforcement and escape, and they do not require realistic logic because they inhabit metaphysical realms. Comparative folklore therefore plays an important role in understanding how narratives carry cultural meaning across societies (Olaoye & Henry, 2024). Because oral

traditions have no single canonical text, variation is expected (Danandjaja, 1986; Olaoye & Henry, 2024), and it would be misguided to judge the realities depicted in folktales solely by contemporary standards of plausibility. The "pre-logical" character of the celestial marriage (Danandjaja, 1986) is precisely what allows it to express relations that cannot be stated directly: between a community and its origins, between speech and social harmony, and between the claims of spouse and parent.

Gender and the Celestial Wife

The two tales also invite a gendered reading. In both, the celestial wife is superior to her husband in origin and power, which supports Wiyatmi's (2021) observation that Indonesian celestial-maiden tales accord the maiden a higher status than the earthly man. Leavy (1994) reads the recovery of the garment as the wife's reclaiming of autonomy. The Torajan wife goes further, dictating the terms of the marriage and enforcing them, whereas the Korean wife, once restored to heaven, becomes the generous party who accommodates her husband's needs. In both cases, the man's access to heaven depends on the woman and her kin, a pattern consistent with Wiyatmi's (2021) reading of the celestial wife as a revered maternal ancestor.

CONCLUSION

This study compared the Torajan *To Manurung* tale of Polo Padang with the Korean *Woodcutter and the Heavenly Maiden*. The two tales share the generic core of tale type ATU 400, namely the descent of celestial maidens, the loss of the garment, a hierogamous marriage, the wife's return to heaven, and the husband's ascent, but they differ in every culturally distinctive motif. In the absence of shared distinctive motifs or a plausible route of contact, their resemblance is best explained by polygenesis: the recurrence of a narrative form that answers universal questions about heaven and earth, marriage, and loss.

Read as microcosms, the two tales encode different worldviews. The Torajan tale grounds social hierarchy in cosmic descent and makes ethical speech the condition of a lasting union, a folk idea that resonates with the values of Torajan ceremonial discourse. The Korean tale dramatises the tension between conjugal and filial loyalty and ends by affirming an irreversible boundary between heaven and earth. Both tales show that human imagination, while transcending the literal truths of its time, remains bound to the social and material world in which it is produced.

The study is limited to one version of each tale and relies on translated texts. Future research could extend the comparison to other Indonesian versions (such as Jaka Tarub and the Bugis–Makassar tomanurung narratives) and to Japanese and Chinese variants, examine the source-language texts, and explore how these tales are being adapted in contemporary media and in literature education.

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