
Making Meaning from Historical Fiction Picturebooks about Indonesian Heroes

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ABSTRACT: We investigated how children make meaning as they read historical fiction picturebooks. Three teachers and a total of 61 students from three different regions of Indonesia participated. We collected field notes, video recordings, and artifacts through read-alouds and subsequent response activities. The findings show that students explored the books by actively engaging in conversations about misconceptions of gender and schooling, connections of the past and the present, and negotiation of moral values and emotions within the fabric of Aceh Province's history and Indonesian society. It highlights that historical fiction picturebooks can encourage students to think critically about their history and culture to make sense of the world they live in today.

KEYWORDS: Historical fiction, picturebooks, reader response, Indonesian hero, literacy

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Indonesia, characterized by a multitude of islands, ethnic groups, and languages, manifests a rich tapestry of stories that emerge from the coexistence of its diverse elements. This tapestry includes "National Hero" stories encouraged by the Indonesian government to frame Indonesian collective history, identity, and values in opposition to colonialism (Fogg, 2019). A large number of historical figures from different regions have received the title of National Hero and massive

campaigns have been carried out to send messages of patriotism and integrate hero stories into the national curriculum (Parlindungan et al., 2024).

Hero stories from Aceh Province are seldom told due to complicated factors. Aceh Province on the northern tip of Sumatra Island is comprised of 13 indigenous ethnic groups, 11 local vernaculars, and six religious communities across 23 districts (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Aceh, 2023). Unlike other provinces in Indonesia, Aceh is renowned for its extensive history of violent armed conflicts. These conflicts started with Dutch colonization in 1857-1942, followed by Japanese occupation in 1942-1945, and persisted during the civil war of the Free Aceh Movement against the Indonesian Government in 1976. It ended when the devastating Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami struck the region in 2004. Aceh finally made peace with the Indonesian government, marked by the Helsinki Treaty and the granting of special autonomy to implement Islamic law (Sharia) in 2005 (Graf et al., 2010).

Aceh's long history of armed conflicts and acts of violence creates difficulties for meaningful dialogue between teachers and students in understanding historical events and in constructing what it means to be a hero within the fabric of Indonesian society. At the same time, stories about Aceh are a link between the present society and its complex historical roots and ancestral heritage.

Building on the view of children as active readers (Rosenblatt, 1988), we examined how sixth-grade Indonesian elementary teachers and students construct meaning in responding to picturebooks about Indonesian Aceh heroes. We intentionally used five historical fiction picturebooks about national heroes from the Aceh Province written by the first author of this article, Firman, and his colleagues in response to the lack of quality historical fiction picturebooks. Despite the focus on Indonesian national heroes, few picturebooks capture their stories and contributions.

Historical fiction picturebooks can encourage students to think critically about their history, culture, and lives today. Through reading stories about historical figures, they can negotiate what counts as a hero and heroism to explore moral issues and understand local-global relationships. However, reading historical fiction picturebooks is a complex process as children transact with the visual images, design elements, and written narratives to construct their understanding of the text (Youngs, 2012).

In this article, we present the meaning-making processes of Indonesian elementary students in three geographical areas as reflective of Indonesian cultural diversity. We describe our theoretical framework of stories as cognitive tools in making sense of the world, transactional reader response theory, and learning as a mediated action. Our methodology involved a qualitative approach to capture and examine students' transactions in read-aloud sessions and response engagements. Finally, we describe the findings and provide some implications for teachers and researchers.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Stories function as fundamental cognitive tools within human experience to help individuals make sense of the world, interpret events, and establish meaningful connections with others (Gotschall, 2013). Story is thus a primary act of mind. This understanding of story underlies the potential of reading historical fiction to encourage narrative imagination by inviting readers into a story world to go beyond facts and experience how people lived, felt, and thought in the past. As readers are immersed in story worlds, they engage with characters and develop emotional connections and empathy, as well as knowledge about a person and time period (Short, 2012). In contrast to the negative experiences of reading history textbooks in school, Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2008) document the many ways in which historical fiction as story engages students and strengthens their understanding of history.

We draw upon transactional reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1988) to understand the meaning-making processes of students. According to Rosenblatt, reading is an event that involves the reader and the text in a particular time and context. Multiple social and personal factors blend together to influence this event. The process of meaning construction is not a linear relationship between the reader and the text, but a transaction with each other in ways that influence and are conditioned by many reciprocal factors in the situation (Rosenblatt, 2002).

Rosenblatt (1988) argues that reader attention during reading often shifts within a continuum across a range of aesthetic and efferent stances. Aesthetic stance refers to a meaning-making process that involves “perception through the senses, feelings, and intuitions” in which readers adopt “an attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is being lived through during the reading event” (p. 13), a private element. Efferent stance refers to a meaning-making process in which “attention is centered predominantly on what is to be extracted and retained after the reading event” (p. 12), a public element.

Aesthetic response in which meaning is derived predominantly from the private element such as feelings, attitudes, and ideas, is the first step of critical response. To push critical response forward, a reader shifts attention to a more efferent stance, which is related to cognitive or public elements such as synthesizing information or analyzing its structure. This might be done by bringing in other texts, examples, or contexts and engaging in dialogue with other readers so students make connections and extend their responses (Rosenblatt, 2002).

To this end, language is viewed as a socially generated public system of communication in which each individual internalizes meaning in transaction with the environment (Rosenblatt, 1988). This underscores the concept of learning as a mediated action (Vygotsky, 1978) in which language and text serve as mediational tools to facilitate learning that is socially situated (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). By verbally expressing their thoughts and experiences in a social setting, students actively generate meaning. Since text is a dynamic tool that encompasses both the reader’s experience and the marks on the page, it is

essential to take into account not only the words and structure of a written work but also the ways students transact with the text and with each other in the classroom (Garas-York & Almasi, 2016). A range of voices, tensions, and conflicts add to the participants' collaborative learning efforts through meaningful interaction (Nystrand, 2006).

Our research focuses on children's transactions with picturebooks as texts that combine words, images, and design to support young readers in meaning-making. Connolly (2013) noted that historical fiction picturebooks present sophisticated narratives that enable children to encounter even the most violent historical events. Her findings indicate the power of picturebooks as tools for readers to explore moral values and engage with emotions in meaning-making processes.

Youngs (2012) examined students' responses to historical fiction picturebooks after receiving instruction on visual aspects and design elements. The fifth-grade students who participated in the study discussed enslavement, Japanese imprisonment, and civil rights, based on their transactions with the visual images and design elements, not just the written text.

Historical fiction as a safe space for students to encounter difficult histories is documented in research on student responses. Brooks and Hampton (2005) found that historical fiction provided a safe space for sixth-grade students to confront racism's impact on the past as well as to understand the present. Bracey et al. (2006) found that historical fiction on Irish refugees engaged 7–12-year-old students in developing historical understandings, connected past to present, and provided a safe context to explore difficult issues.

These qualitative research studies document the potential of historical fiction for children's understanding and inform our study in terms of research methods and pedagogical strategies. A study by Kesler et al. (2016), for example, encouraged our use of multiple response strategies beyond discussion to gain deeper insights into children's understandings.

Method

We engaged in qualitative field-based research to capture a glimpse into the meaning-making processes of sixth-grade teachers and students in reading historical fiction picturebooks about Indonesian heroes. We selected this methodology as most appropriate to our focus on examining students' meaning-making processes in responding to a set of picturebooks. This section describes the context and participants, our positionality, the picturebooks, data collection, and analysis.

This study took place in three schools situated in different provinces of Indonesia, including: (1) West Aceh in Aceh Province, (2) Surabaya in East Java Province, and (3) Samarinda in East Kalimantan Province. We chose these schools based on the ongoing collaboration between Firman and the teachers to

get access to and contextual understanding of the participants. Additionally, the participants in these sites represent Indonesian diversity of cultures based on geographical areas. Aceh represents the west part, East Java represents the middle, and East Kalimantan represents the east part of Indonesia. A total of three teachers and 61 students in their classrooms participated. We received their consent as well as the students' parental consents prior to conducting the study. All names are pseudonyms.

The first site was in West Aceh of Aceh Province with Mrs. Syarifah, a sixth-grade lead teacher at a public elementary school located in a suburban area. She obtained a master's degree in elementary education and had more than 14 years of teaching experience. Mrs. Syarifah self-identified as a Muslim and was fully conversant with the culture and traditions of Aceh. She spoke Acehnese vernacular and Bahasa Indonesia on a daily basis. There were 16 students in her class that she viewed as fluent readers who still needed more practice on fluency and comprehension. All students were Muslim and Acehnese.

The second site was a public school in Surabaya, East Java Province with Mr. Rafif, a sixth-grade lead teacher who had a master's degree in elementary education and 17 years of teaching experience. Mr. Rafif and his students self-identified as Muslim with Javanese cultural heritage. Some considered themselves as Madurese because their parents were born in Madura but had long resided in Surabaya. Mr. Rafif remarked that his 23 students were proficient readers who could engage in discussions about texts in small or large groups.

The third site was in Mrs. Dina's sixth-grade classroom in a private Islamic school located in Samarinda, East Kalimantan where most people share Banjar cultural heritage. She asserted that the 22 students in her class were all Muslim but represented a variety of cultural backgrounds, including Java, Bugis, and Kutai. Mrs. Dina had 25 years of elementary school teaching experience with a master's degree in English education. She viewed students as fluent readers who loved extensive reading. They could read independently for extended periods of time and were adept at choosing books to read.

Researchers' Positionality

The first author, Firman, is considered an insider in this study in that he shares cultural and religious attributes with the participants (Braun & Clark, 2013). He was born and raised in Aceh and is an observant Muslim. He wrote the picturebooks used in this study as part of another project looking at how Indonesian hero stories can be reconstructed in children's literature. He plans to use the reader responses from this study to revise the picturebooks. In 2021, he engaged with the three teacher participants in this study during a nine-day workshop where he served as a facilitator and subsequently maintained communication through various programs, assuming a mentorship role. This

ongoing relationship facilitated his access to the schools for the purpose of conducting this study.

The second author of this study, Kathy, is a professor specializing in children's literature at the University of Arizona, USA. In the context of this research, she is considered an outsider due to her identity as a white American and non-Muslim (Braun & Clark, 2013). Her participation commenced when she interacted with Firman in a visiting scholar program at the Worlds of Words Center for Global Literatures and Literacies within the U of A College of Education during the Fall semester 2023. Her understanding of Indonesian and Islamic cultures is based on her subjective perceptions and conversations with Firman. Leveraging her expertise and existing contributions to global literatures, Kathy played a significant role in enhancing the trustworthiness and credibility of this research.

The Picturebooks

Firman and his colleagues authored the five picturebooks used in this study. We intentionally selected these books due to the lack of historical fiction picturebooks that depict the stories of Indonesia's national heroes (Parlindungan et al., 2024), as well as the practical goal of revising the books based on children's responses. The books were composed in Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language) and were published as a series by Bestari in 2023, which include: (1) *Cut Nyak Dhien: Ibu Perbu dari Tanah Rencong*, (2) *Teuku Nyak Arief: Pelita Pendidikan Aceh*, (3) *Cut Nyak Meutia: Spirit Perjuangan Aceh*, (4) *Teuku Muhammad Hasan: Rencong Pendidikan Aceh*, and (5) *Teuku Umar: Merebut Kapal Nisero*. These books portray the lives and struggles of Acehnese heroes in fighting for the freedom of Indonesia, particularly during Dutch colonization. The participants received digital copies of the books. Unlike other trade books about Indonesian hero stories, these books were written as historical fiction with considerable text complexity for fourth-to-sixth-grade students and contained multiple perspectives of moral values with less description of violence. Table 1 gives brief summaries of the picturebooks. See Appendix for detailed descriptions of each picturebook.

Table 1*Summary of the Picturebooks*

Title	Hero	Summary
<i>Cut Nyak Dhien: Ibu Perbu dari Tanah Rencong</i>	Cut Nyak Dhien	She was exiled by the Dutch to Sumedang in Java Island, miles away from Aceh, because of her influence in the Aceh war.
<i>Teuku Nyak Arief: Pelita Pendidikan Aceh</i>	Teuku Nyak Arief	He established a school in Aceh for many Acehnese children who did not go to school, but the school was viewed negatively as influenced by the Dutch.
<i>Cut Nyak Meutia: Spirit Perjuangan Aceh</i>	Cut Nyak Meutia	She did not want her son to be involved in war because he was too young. He secretly participated in military training and fought against the Dutch.
<i>Teuku Muhammad Hasan: Rencong Pendidikan Aceh</i>	Teuku Muhammad Hasan	He fought for freedom through youth organizations and activism with the Dutch attempting to obstruct his efforts.
<i>Teuku Umar: Merebut Kapal Nisero</i>	Teuku Umar	He pretended to be an ally with the Dutch and was able to take control of Dutch warships and weapons.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred through a series of interconnected activities centered around read-alouds and response engagements, based in Rosenblatt's (1988) transactional theory, to invite children to share their thinking and connections. Our goal was to understand their meaning-making processes, not to assess comprehension through close-ended questions. Each session was comprised of 15-20 minutes of read-alouds, followed by an additional 10-20 minutes of response activities. A total of 30 meetings in Bahasa Indonesia were conducted over the course of eight weeks with sessions occurring twice a week.

Teachers read aloud each of the picturebooks in digital format twice a week. Response activities prompted students to reflect on their engagement with the picturebooks, employing strategies such as sketch to stretch (Short et al., 1996) and graphic organizers to capture responses. Each meeting was documented in field notes, videotapes, and artifacts of student writings and drawings.

We analyzed the data qualitatively through constant-comparison analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Firman first analyzed the data to identify possible themes through reading and rereading the fieldnotes. The data from the recordings and artifacts were compared to each other as possible themes emerged and were enhanced by the data. Chunks from the recordings were transcribed verbatim and

translated into English. Secondly, as Firman compared the data, he categorized the data into chunks and allocated labels to those chunks. For instance, the initial categories of the discussions during read-aloud sessions included labels such as gender, Islamic values, emotions, cultural issues, and real-life challenges. These categories were merged or eliminated to create the themes of contesting misconceptions of gender and schooling, connecting the past to the present, and negotiating moral values and emotions. Finally, as themes were identified across data, Firman and Kathy met to discuss the themes, to compare the data within the themes, and to establish trustworthiness of the analysis.

Findings of Children’s Meaning-Making

The process of meaning-making unfolded for students and teachers during read-aloud sessions and subsequent response activities. We found three major themes that reflect the interpretive processes of participants, including the contestation of misconceptions about gender and schooling, the connection between historical events and the present, and the negotiation of moral values and emotions.

Contesting Misconceptions of Gender and Schooling

We found that teachers and students challenged stereotypical notions regarding the gender roles of heroes and the role of schooling in Islam. Through guided conversations and critical reflection, students were encouraged to question and deconstruct preconceived ideas. In Mrs. Syarifah’s class situated in Aceh where the dominant culture is Islam, they read aloud *Cut Meutia: Spirit Perjuangan Aceh* and discussed Cut Meutia’s role as a female, mother, and heroine. As they discussed why she forbade her child from getting involved in war, a male student named Andi pointed out, “Because she was afraid of losing her child. Raja Sabi is actually a boy. Boys should go to war.” A female student named Putri noted, “It seems like all mothers are always worried about their children, whether they are boys or girls. My Mom is always nagging. She doesn’t allow this; she doesn’t allow that.” Andi connected to his life, “My mother also sometimes worries too much. Sometimes I’m not allowed to go fishing by boat with my brother because she is afraid something might happen to me.”

In this conversation, issues surrounding gender roles were explored within the context of a historical narrative. Initially, there was a perception that Cut Meutia's decision to prevent her child from participating in warfare was linked to traditional gender roles, expecting boys to engage in such activities. However, Mrs. Syarifah guided the discussion toward a broader perspective by highlighting the universal concern of mothers for the safety of their children, irrespective of gender. The consensus among students, exemplified by Putri’s and Andi's reflections on their own mothers' worries, came from an aesthetic stance, and underscored the

idea that maternal anxiety transcends gender roles. Ultimately, the teacher and students recognized that Cut Meutia's concerns were rooted in parental love and apprehension for a child's well-being rather than in specific gender-related expectations, challenging preconceived notions about gender roles.

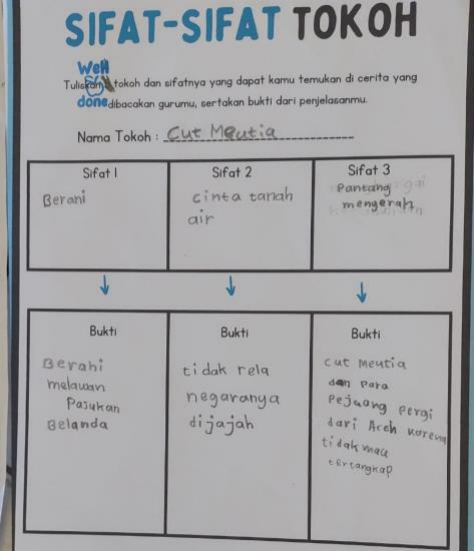
Another example is from Mrs. Dina's class in Samarinda where the dominant culture is compromised of the Banjar ethnicity and Islam. They had similar responses in reading *Cut Meutia*, but centered their discussion around misconceptions of what skills women possess as war leaders.

- Idrus : "She's really powerful, isn't she? A heroine. A woman who can make people around her submit. Does she have any skills though?"
- Mrs. Dina : "That's a good question. What skills do you think Cut Meutia had?"
- Salma : "She was skilled in war tactics."
- Kahfi : "She was also brave"
- Mrs. Dina : "Why did you ask that question, Idrus?"
- Idrus : [in silent]
- Alya : "Women also have skills, Mrs., not just men."
- Mrs. Dina : "Give me some examples of the skills we possess."
- Salma : "We can become engineers, presidents, many things!"
- Mrs. Dina : "Yes, are those skills different from men's?"
- Students : "No"

This conversation reflects an awareness and challenge to traditional gender roles, suggesting a positive shift in students' perceptions of the potential for women to excel in roles traditionally associated with men, like leadership. This finding was also supported by artifact data collected from Mrs. Dina's class, where students analyzed traits of characters in the *Cut Meutia* book by listing traits followed by evidence from the text. Figure 1 is an example from a female student named Sarah who identified Cut Meutia as a heroine with bravery, nationalism, and perseverance based on evidence she found in the text, which challenged traditional views of traits possessed by men as heroes.

Figure 1

Sarah's Artifact on Cut Meutia's Personal Traits

Original Version	English Translation																								
 <p>SIFAT-SIFAT TOKOH</p> <p>Tuliskan tokoh dan sifatnya yang dapat kamu temukan di cerita yang dibacakan gurumu, sertakan bukti dari penjelasannya.</p> <p>Nama Tokoh: <u>Cut Meutia</u></p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Sifat 1</th> <th>Sifat 2</th> <th>Sifat 3</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Berahi</td> <td>cinta tanah air</td> <td>Pantang menyerah</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Bukti</th> <th>Bukti</th> <th>Bukti</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Berahi melawan Pasukan Belanda</td> <td>tidak rela negaranya dijajah</td> <td>cut Meutia dan para Pejuang pergi dari Aceh karena tidak mau ditangkap</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Sifat 1	Sifat 2	Sifat 3	Berahi	cinta tanah air	Pantang menyerah	Bukti	Bukti	Bukti	Berahi melawan Pasukan Belanda	tidak rela negaranya dijajah	cut Meutia dan para Pejuang pergi dari Aceh karena tidak mau ditangkap	<p>CHARACTERS' PERSONAL TRAITS</p> <p>Write down a character and his/her personal traits that you found in the story read to you. Provide evidences on your list.</p> <p>Name of the character: Cut Meutia</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Trait 1</th> <th>Trait 2</th> <th>Trait 3</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Brave</td> <td>Love for the homeland</td> <td>Never give up</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Evidence</th> <th>Evidence</th> <th>Evidence</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>She was brave in fighting against the Dutch troops</td> <td>She was not willing to let her country be colonized</td> <td>Cut Meutia and her troops left Aceh, so they did not get caught.</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Trait 1	Trait 2	Trait 3	Brave	Love for the homeland	Never give up	Evidence	Evidence	Evidence	She was brave in fighting against the Dutch troops	She was not willing to let her country be colonized	Cut Meutia and her troops left Aceh, so they did not get caught.
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In addition to views of hero's gender roles, we also found that students' responses revolved around a misconception that schooling is forbidden in Islam, particularly when they read *Teuku Nyak Arief: Pelita Pendidikan Aceh*. Data from Mr. Rafif's class in Surabaya, where the dominant culture is Javanese and Islam, highlights a historical misconception about schooling in Aceh, where formal education is associated with Indonesians with Dutch foreign influence. Mr. Rafif noted, "At certain points, [students] appeared surprised when they found out that school was prohibited, or when parents actually discouraged their children from going to school. They were puzzled as to why school was prohibited and parents were discouraging education."

After reading this book, Mr. Rafif responded to students' questions about Islam's stance on formal education. This excerpt reflects the importance of critical thinking and context in addressing misconceptions about education in a religious and historical context.

- Hasna : "This is new to me that, in the past, school was forbidden in Aceh. Were there really schools that were forbidden?"
- Mr. Rafif : "Yes, why were schools forbidden in Aceh back then?"

- Bayu : "But he also studies at the Meunasah [Mosque], Sir. So, it's the same. He went for study, just not in school."
- Mr. Rafif : "That's a great observation, Bayu! What did he study at the Meunasah?"
- Students : "He studied religion!"
- Mr. Rafif : "In this story, what was being 'forbidden'? Is it studying at the Meunasah or at school?"
- Hasna : "Studying at school. Maybe because there was only one school in Aceh back then, so people might not have known. They might have thought the school belonged to the Dutch, so it was forbidden."
- Yudi : "Yes, but why was school considered forbidden though? Is education really prohibited in Islam?"
- Mr. Rafif : "That's a good question, Yudi. Is education forbidden in Islam?"
- Hasna : "No, Sir. In the story, T. Nyak Arief mentioned that Islam doesn't prohibit knowledge about the world. In fact, Muslims are encouraged to acquire knowledge."

This excerpt shows that Hasna initially expressed surprise that schools were forbidden in Aceh in the past, which is especially important since all students in this setting came from Islamic family backgrounds. Bayu made an insightful observation, noting that although formal schooling may have been restricted, learning still took place at the Meunasah (Mosque). Mr. Rafif encouraged critical thinking by asking what was being 'forbidden' in the story. Hasna speculated that it was studying at a formal school, possibly due to a lack of awareness or a misconception that this school belonged to the Dutch. Yudi raised an essential question about whether formal education was genuinely prohibited in Islam. Mr. Rafif seized this opportunity to clarify, prompting students to reflect on Islamic perspectives on education. Interestingly, Hasna, who started the discussion, concluded that Islam did not prohibit knowledge about the world, and Muslims were encouraged to acquire knowledge.

Connecting the Past to the Present

This theme emphasized the significance of history as a living, dynamic force that continues to influence and shape our world today. In the discussions, teachers bridged the gap between the past and present, using the picturebooks and actions of the characters as a lens through which students could explore and understand current societal issues and challenges. Data from Mrs. Dina's class in Samarinda

expanded the discussion to address the misconception about Islam and formal education from the past to the present.

- Alya : "Do they not think that both religious and common knowledge are equally important?"
- Mrs. Dina : "Yes, have any of you ever heard before that school is forbidden in Islam?"
- Students : "No!"
- Kahfi : "Are there still people in Aceh who think that way, Ms.?"
- Mrs. Dina : "That's a good question. I wonder if there still are. Nowadays, things have become more advanced. There are many good schools that still uphold Islamic values. In fact, Aceh implements Islamic law, which is different from other regions in Indonesia."
- Alya : "So, in Islamic law, is school not forbidden?"
- Teacher : "What do you all think?"
- Students : "No!"
- Mrs. Dina : "In the past, many ordinary people misunderstood the rules of Islam due to a lack of knowledge about Islam. T. Nyak Arif and other scholars who had a deeper understanding of Islam did not forbid public schools. Learning is allowed in any field, as long as it's for the greater good."

In this context, participants from Samarinda shared common Islamic knowledge and culture with students in Aceh. A student named Alya initiated a discussion on the perceived importance of both religious and common knowledge, setting the stage for an exploration of historical attitudes toward education in Islamic communities. The teacher further propelled the dialogue by posing a question about the misconception that school is forbidden in Islam. Kahfi's inquiry about the persistence of such beliefs in Aceh reflects a curiosity about the continuity of historical perceptions. Alya seeks clarification on whether education is forbidden under Aceh's Islamic law today, prompting Mrs. Dina to encourage critical thinking by providing information related to their questions. Mrs. Dina's response not only highlights the advancements in education in Aceh, but it also delves into the past. Mrs. Dina ties the historical narrative to Teuku Nyak Arief, emphasizing the role of scholars in dispelling misconceptions and underscoring the interconnectedness of the past and the present in shaping beliefs about formal education in Islamic communities today.

The teachers and students also made connections between the past and present through a discussion about the function of places of worship and Muslim women's clothing. Data from Mrs. Syarifah's class in Aceh shows that students made an interpretation from reading *Teuku Muhammad Hasan: Rencong Pendidikan Aceh* by considering the illustrations to note that meetings in the past occurred in the mosques.

- T. Hilal : "Seems like it's the same as today. Men usually have meetings in the mosque."
- Mrs. Syarifah : "Yes, in our area, the mosque is often used for meetings besides being a place of worship."
- Cut Nabila : "Maulid (celebration of the Prophet's birth) is also held in the mosque, right?"
- Mrs. Syarifah : "That's correct"

This conversation reflects the dynamic and multifunctional role of mosques both in the past and the present. Mrs. Syarifah's inquiry about meeting locations in the past implied that historical mosques in Aceh served not only as places of worship, but also as communal meeting spaces. This notion is affirmed by T. Hilal and Andi, who observed that meetings in mosques persist in contemporary times. Mrs. Syarifah reinforced this idea by noting that, in their local area, mosques are frequently utilized for meetings alongside their primary function as places of worship. Cut Nabila's contribution introduced the dimension of cultural and religious events, citing the celebration of Maulid in mosques, a practice confirmed by Mrs. Syarifah that still exists today. Consequently, the conversation portrays mosques as integral community hubs with a rich history of serving diverse societal functions beyond religious rites.

Additionally, the discussion between students in Mrs. Syarifah's class also provides insights into the historical and cultural aspects of clothing and modesty in the past and present. Siti asked Uswah whether Muslim women dressed modestly in the past like today by referencing the illustrations of *Cut Meutia's* book. Uswah's response suggested a perception that people in the past, possibly due to wartime conditions, might not have had access to or worn modest clothing as today. Siti then emphasized that Acehnese people have been Muslims for a long time and that wearing proper clothing has been an obligation. This response introduced an Islamic perspective that emphasizes the enduring cultural and religious influence on dress codes, particularly in Aceh where Islamic practices have been followed for a significant period. However, Uswah countered the argument by connecting with Cut Meutia's hijab and sparked a discussion about variations in the way hijabs were worn in the past and in the present. Overall, this conversation suggests that religious practices related to modesty and attire both in the past and in the present reflect the intersection of faith, tradition, and community practices.

Connections between the past and the present were also centered around discussions about colonization. This awareness not only enriched students' comprehension of historical forces but also shed light on the persistence of challenges in the contemporary world. Mr. Rafif in Surabaya guided students in conversation about whether colonization still exists today based on their reading of the *Cut Meutia* book. The dialogue delved into the modern manifestations of colonization and shifted away from traditional warfare to highlight the influence of the Internet. Mr. Rafif held the interpretive authority in the discussion to raise students' awareness that global platforms like TikTok and Instagram were created by non-Indonesians, yet widely utilized by Indonesians as a form of colonization of the mind.

This discussion expanded to the impact on education and motivation suggesting that the ease of access to low-quality content on social media may contribute to complacency among Indonesian youths. The mention of global events, like the Russia-Ukraine conflict, reinforced the idea that the current era has erased traditional boundaries and demanded preparedness and competitiveness. Mr. Rafif emphasized the dominance of foreigners in leading Indonesian companies to underscore a contemporary form of economic colonization. The conversation effectively bridges historical notions of colonization with present-day realities by urging students to be cognizant of these dynamics and encouraging them to aspire to future leadership and self-determination.

Negotiating Moral Values and Emotions

The picturebooks in this study provoked deep emotional responses and teachers encouraged students to navigate and reflect upon their own ethical compasses. Through discussions and reflective exercises, students grappled with complex moral dilemmas in the narratives. Mrs. Syarifah in Aceh noted that the *Teuku Muhammad Hasan* book "is a rich source of inspiration with values such as courage, the spirit of struggle, leadership, and justice. Students can learn from the experiences and actions of Teuku Muhammad Hasan and apply these values in their daily lives." This underscored the pivotal role of emotion and moral reasoning in heroism as students learned not only to identify heroes but also to contemplate the qualities and ethical principles that define heroism.

The negotiation of moral values includes the concept of respect to the elderly and the notion of revenge. In Surabaya, after reading *Cut Nyak Dhien: Ibu Perbu dari Tanah Rencong*, Mr. Rafif initiated a discussion about why the elderly should be respected. This force holds significant importance within Indonesian cultural norms rooted in traditions, values, and societal structures. The elderly are often seen as repositories of wisdom, experience, and cultural heritage. This notion persisted during colonization by the Dutch East India Company, although the Dutch used the elderly as a tool to gain power and control over Indonesian citizens. Mr. Rafif initiated a discussion about *Cut Nyak Dhien*, asking why respected elders are needed.

- Hasna : "So there can be role models, sir."
- Mr. Rafif : "Is respecting others limited to just those who are older?"
- Students : "No"
- Mr. Rafif : "No, it isn't. We should respect everyone."
- Ali : "Respect the elderly, love the younger ones."
- Mr. Rafif : Yes, very good. But in this context, why do the Dutch respect Cut Nyak Dhien? " After all, she was a prisoner of war."
- Dayu : "The Dutch respect the elders of the Indonesian people."
- Hasna : "The Dutch are like us, sir. They respect the elders."

Students recognized the importance of elders as role models emphasizing the broader societal value of having respected figures within the community. Mr. Rafif extended the discussion to question whether respect is limited to age, and students asserted that it should extend to everyone. Ali's statement, "Respect the elderly, love the younger ones," encapsulates a balanced perspective on intergenerational relationships. When Dayu and Hasna suggested that the Dutch respected the elders of the Indonesian people, Mr. Rafif drew parallels between Indonesian and Dutch cultural norms. Despite the complex colonial history, a mutual understanding of respecting elders persisted, which serves as a common cultural thread in the context of Dutch colonization.

In relation to cultural norms in Indonesia, students in Samarinda and Surabaya exhibited a critical engagement with illustrations in the *Cut Meutia* book. They expressed concerns about the perceived impropriety of Cut Meutia's depiction sitting atop a palanquin while being carried by her people. This reaction reflects the cultural sensitivity of students towards symbols of authority and leadership. In Indonesian cultural norms, hierarchical structures and displays of authority are often approached with a nuanced perspective emphasizing humility and communal values. Students' critique of the illustration suggests an awareness of cultural nuances and a desire to uphold values of respect and equality within their cultural context.

Another moral value negotiation was evident in Mrs. Dina's class in Samarinda during the discussion of the *Cut Meutia* book about the concept of revenge within Islamic teachings. Salma raised a question about the permissibility of seeking revenge by citing the character Raja Sabi's intention to avenge his mother's death by colonialists. Kahfi contributed by distinguishing between revenge and the pursuit of a just fight against oppression. Mrs. Dina, aligning with Kahfi's viewpoint, emphasized that seeking revenge is discouraged in Islamic teaching. The discussion clarified that Raja Sabi's motivation was not rooted in

personal vendetta but rather in a commitment to his mother's cause and the broader struggle for Acehese independence. Their acknowledgment that Raja Sabi was not driven by vengeance but by a promise to his mother reinforces the notion that Islamic justice surpasses individual retaliation.

During the reading activities, students negotiated their emotions. Mr. Rafif in Surabaya noted that,

children enjoy it because they can relate to the feelings of the characters in the story. They appear sad when they learn that Cut Meutia has passed away. Conversely, they become very excited when the character Raja Sabi is in the middle of a battle.

This emotional connection to characters demonstrates the power of literature in fostering empathy and understanding that allows students to vicariously experience and relate to the emotions of the characters. Students' artifacts supported this finding when they responded to the books in a sketch to stretch (Short et al., 1996).

Figure 2

Student's Artifact in Aceh

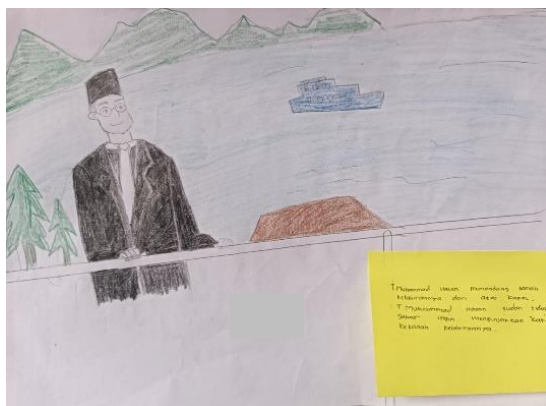


Figure 3

Student's Artifact in Samarinda



In Mrs. Syarifah's class in Aceh, Sukma engaged with Teuku Muhammad Hasan's book by illustrating a captivating scene depicting his return to Aceh's harbor after three years abroad (Figure 2). Sukma found this moment significant because it resonated with her own emotions about missing her hometown if she were to live far away from her parents, especially abroad. Sukma drew upon a personal experience of a brief trip to Medan, where the separation from her parents for just two days felt prolonged. This indicates the emotional connection she has to her home. Similarly, in Mrs. Dina's class in Samarinda, Aminah visually represented two noteworthy scenes from the *Cut Nyak Dhen* book (Figure 3). She illustrated the moment Cut Nyak Dhen arrived in Sumedang by truck, considering it the most exciting part of the story. Additionally, Aminah depicted Cut Nyak Dhen's death by marking it as the most poignant and sorrowful aspect of the

narrative. These student expressions not only reflect their engagement with the literature but also offer valuable insights into the emotional resonance and personal connections students establish with historical narratives, contributing to a richer understanding of the texts.

Discussion

Through reading historical fiction, Brooks and Hampton (2005) argue that readers acquire insight into the role of texts as social artifacts that actively promote perspectives on history. This notion dispels the assumption of readers' neutrality or innocent portrayal of historical events. In our study, the contestation of misconceptions about gender roles and formal education in Islam mirrors the broader discourse on the influence of texts in shaping historical narratives and perspectives. The participants in our study actively constructed meaning by utilizing Rosenblatt's (1988) aesthetic and efferent stances and drawing from multiple social and personal understandings. Incorporating historical fiction in teaching can help students develop a critical understanding of how texts actively shape perspectives of history, challenge preconceived assumptions of stereotypes, and encourage the exploration of diverse social and personal factors in constructing meaning.

The connection of past to present was identified in all of the research on response to historical fiction in our literature review. For example, Youngs (2012) discusses the importance of readers engaging with historical fiction to recognize that the narrative comprises a blend of elements, some of which are rooted in historical authenticity while others are products of imaginative storytelling. This awareness aligns with the theme identified in our analysis, where historical events are portrayed as a bridge to contemporary issues. This connection enables students to appreciate the multifaceted nature of historical narratives and their relevance in navigating the complexities of the present day, particularly texts that reflect students' own cultures. This supports learning as a mediated action through texts and dialogues (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) and the selection of texts based on students' personal and sociocultural factors to facilitate learning (Parlindungan & Rodgers, 2022).

Additionally, throughout the study, students engaged with historical fiction picturebooks that present differing viewpoints of moral values and emotions to challenge colonialism. Historical fiction, as demonstrated by Connolly (2013) and Crawford et al. (2008), frequently establishes moral values and engages with the emotions of readers through written narratives and visual images. This genre underscores its capacity to evoke empathy, provoke ethical reflection, enhance readers' connection with the narratives, and explore the complexities of the human experience within historical contexts. In both the educational context and the realm of historical fiction, the interplay of moral values and emotions plays a pivotal role in enriching the overall understanding and engagement of students with history.

This study highlights the cultural impact of historical fiction picturebooks when used across Indonesia's diverse regions. For example, students in Aceh, Surabaya, and Samarinda, where Islam dominates, may connect more with narratives shaped by Islamic teachings, while those in Bali or Papua interpret stories through their own cultural lenses. These varied responses show how picturebooks help reconcile local histories with national narratives, fostering critical reflection on cultural identity and a deeper understanding of Indonesia's diverse past (Whitford et al., 2024).

The findings of this study suggest a potential benefit in incorporating historical fiction as a pedagogical tool within the current Indonesian curriculum. If teachers in Indonesia integrate carefully selected historical fiction, this approach could help students develop a more nuanced understanding of historical events, fostering critical literacy skills, cultural sensitivity, and a broader perspective on societal issues. Teachers can design strategies that align with the curriculum, ensuring that the inclusion of historical fiction complements existing learning objectives and contributes to the overall development of students' reading and critical thinking.

Finally, we are aware that our positionality in this study might risk potential biases that shape the study's outcomes. As an insider, Firman's cultural and religious alignment with the participants and his role as the picturebooks' author provided valuable context for the findings. Meanwhile Kathy, as an outsider, brought a global perspective on children's literature that enhanced the credibility of the analysis. To anticipate potential biases, we have incorporated triangulation of data sources and included perspectives from other regions in Indonesia to reduce over-reliance on Firman's Aceh-centric viewpoint. We also clearly documented and disclosed our roles to enhance transparency in reporting.

Conclusion

In this study, we have demonstrated that students' interpretive processes in responding to historical fiction picturebooks about Indonesian hero stories highlight the complex and dynamic nature of teaching and learning. Students not only shifted their attention to textual information, but also examined the visual images, fictional elements, and historical concepts that challenge their perspectives about the world. The teachers and students in this study were actively engaged in discussions around misconceptions of gender roles and schooling in Islam, connections between the past and the present, and the negotiation of moral values and emotions. Therefore, we argue that, as readers respond to texts in a transactional manner, taking on a range of aesthetic and efferent stances, they can expand their understanding of texts into critical reading that might foster citizenship and instill values.

Future researchers might want to shift the focus of the study to include a greater cultural diversity of students' backgrounds and to examine teachers'

meaning-making strategies in facilitating discussion. Examining how students' understanding and identity construction transform across different contexts and times would also be important. Finally, future researchers might also be interested in conducting a critical content analysis of the picturebooks used in this study, particularly on what and whose values are represented in the story considering the diversity of Indonesia.

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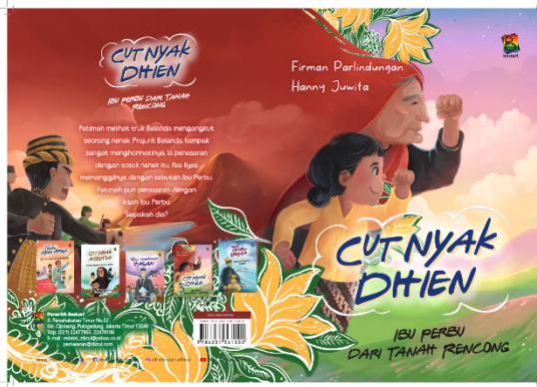
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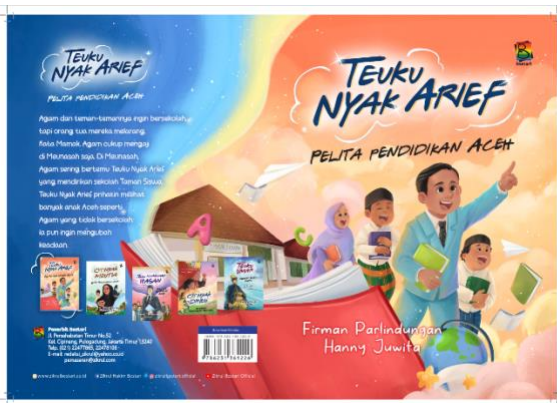
Appendix

Description of the Picturebooks



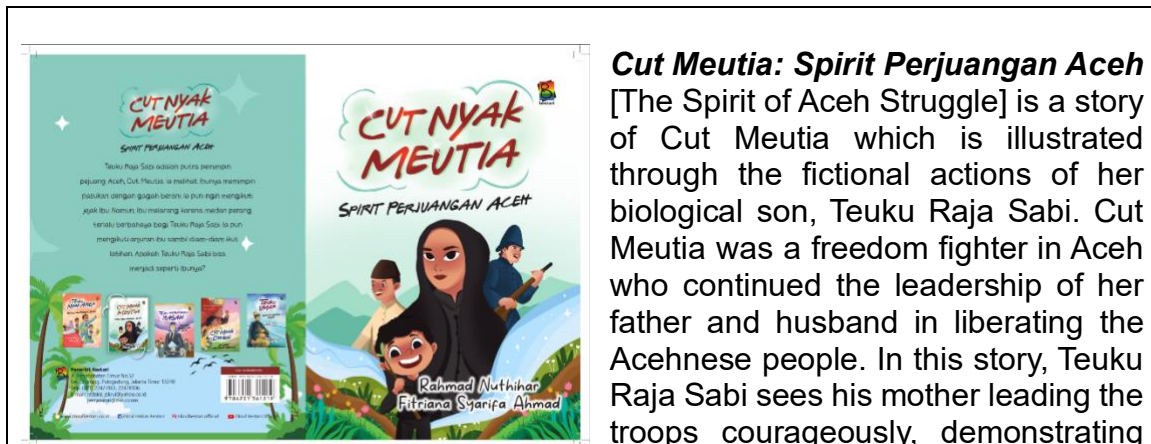
Cut Nyak Dhien: Ibu Perbu dari Tanah Rencong [Mother Perbu from the Land of Rencong] tells the story of Cut Nyak Dhien during her exile in Sumedang, West Java, through the perspective of a fictional character, a local Sumedang girl named Fatimah. Cut Nyak Dhien was a freedom fighter from Aceh who refused to surrender to the Dutch, even when she was elderly and ailing. Unfortunately, she was

betrayed by someone she trusted who revealed her hiding camp to the Dutch soldiers. This was done out of pity for Cut Nyak Dhien's weakened condition. In this book, Fatimah is curious about the story of Cut Nyak Dhien and about Aceh. However, the Dutch soldiers act as obstacles because they fear that Cut Nyak Dhien could incite the local population to rebel against the Dutch. One day, Fatimah and her friends are caught interacting with Cut Nyak Dhien. They burn Cut Nyak Dhien's belongings. Cut Nyak Dhien's physical condition continues to deteriorate until she finally passed away on November 6, 1908.



Teuku Nyak Arief: Pelita Pendidikan Aceh [The Light of Aceh Education] is about Teuku Nyak Arief's struggle to liberate Indonesia. His movement against colonialism was primarily conducted through youth organizations and education. He established the Taman Siswa school in Kuta Raja and the Atjehsche Studiefonds (Aceh Student Fund). His goal was to assist intelligent but

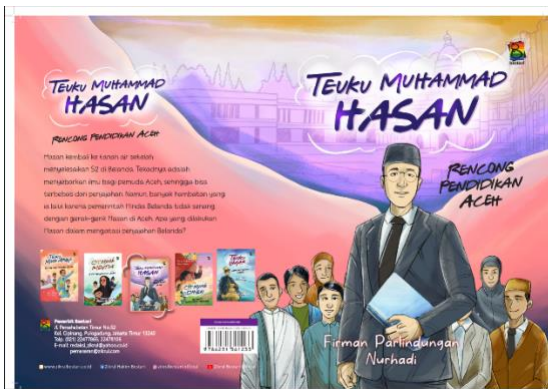
underprivileged children in Aceh who could not attend school due to various reasons. In this book, the story of Teuku Nyak Arief is illustrated through an engagement of a fictional character named Agam, who desires an education but faces societal opposition that deems public schooling forbidden. Learning about this, Teuku Nyak Arief makes various efforts to change the community's misconceptions about schools and the teachings of Islam.



Cut Meutia: Spirit Perjuangan Aceh

[The Spirit of Aceh Struggle] is a story of Cut Meutia which is illustrated through the fictional actions of her biological son, Teuku Raja Sabi. Cut Meutia was a freedom fighter in Aceh who continued the leadership of her father and husband in liberating the Acehnese people. In this story, Teuku Raja Sabi sees his mother leading the troops courageously, demonstrating

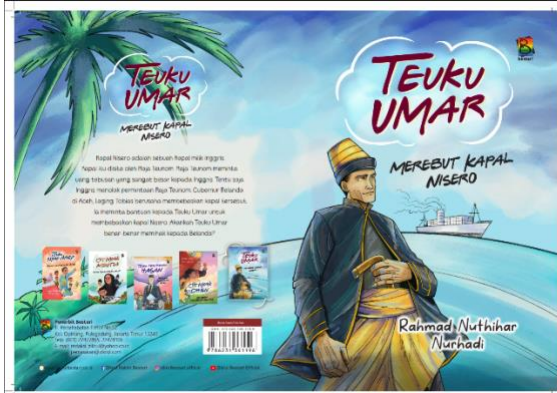
her skills and war strategies. He aspires to follow in her footsteps, but his mother forbids him because the battlefield is too dangerous for Teuku Raja Sabi. He follows his mother's advice to focus on religious studies, but he secretly participates in military training. One day, Cut Meutia passes away during an attack by Dutch forces. As he grows older, Teuku Raja Sabi continues Cut Meutia's bravery and leadership in the fight against the Dutch.



Teuku Muhammad Hasan: Rencong Pendidikan Aceh

[The Rencong of Aceh Education] tells the story of Teuku Muhammad Hasan from a third-person perspective. Teuku Muhammad Hasan played a significant role in the Acehnese people's struggle against colonialism through education and organization. His perspective on independence was influenced by his educational background in law, which

he acquired during his studies in the Netherlands. Hasan returned to Aceh after completing his master's degree with a determination to spread knowledge among the youth of Aceh, aiming for liberation from colonial rule. However, he faced numerous obstacles because the Dutch East Indies government was displeased with Hasan's activities in Aceh. The Dutch made various efforts to obstruct Hasan's movement. Still, Hasan remained undeterred in his efforts, and his struggle could not be suppressed until the Netherlands officially declared Indonesia's independence at the end of World War II.



Teuku Umar: Merebut Kapal Nisero

[Capturing Nisero Ship] depicts the war tactics of Teuku Umar in his fight against the Dutch. Teuku Umar was a respected *Uleebalang* (local leader) who was highly regarded by the Dutch due to his intelligence and significant influence in the Acehnese kingdom. One day, Raja Teunom (a regional king in Teunom) captured a British trading ship (the Nisero) which was passing through the

waters of Teunom and demanded a ransom of 1,000 Spanish Pesetas. The British refused to comply with Raja Teunom's demand and sought the assistance of the Dutch East Indies Government. At this period, Teuku Umar was still pretending to be on the side of the Dutch. The Dutch then requested Teuku Umar and his troops to free the Nisero ship. Teuku Umar complied with their request. However, when they arrived in the waters of Teunom, Teuku Umar and his troops swiftly turned the tables. They took control of all Dutch warships and their weaponry. It is known in history that this incident was not the first time the Dutch were outwitted by Teuku Umar's tactics.

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