
Resistance and Reclamation: Folktales as Decolonization Praxis in Indonesia's Primary Curriculum – A Focus on East Nusa Tenggara

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ABSTRACT: This systematic review examines how East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) folktales have been studied, implemented, and theorized in Indonesia's primary education literature (2010–2025). Using PRISMA procedures, I synthesize empirical, pedagogical, and policy research through third space theory, Indigenous storywork, and decolonial theory. Findings indicate folktales function as linguistically and pedagogically rich resources supporting multilingual identity, multimodal learning, and community-rooted moral reasoning. However, their transformative potential is constrained by assessment regimes, centralized curricular logics, and uneven teacher preparedness. I interpret these patterns as decolonial pause. The review proposes a framework emphasizing linguistic sovereignty, multimodality, and assessment reform to move folktale integration beyond tokenistic inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Folktales, East Nusa Tenggara, epistemic authority, decolonial pause, assessment reform

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Historically, Indonesia's educational system has produced an epistemic gap in which centralized curricular frameworks often ignore alternative ways of knowing and being in the eastern archipelago. In East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), this marginalization appears as manufactured amnesia, relegating local histories and indigenous epistemologies to the periphery of national identity (Anumenechi & Jaga, 2025; Smith, 2021). In debates on multicultural education, there is growing interest in visual and arts-based approaches to multilingual identity and agency. Folktales, as embodied, sensory, and narrative forms of knowledge, therefore have potential as resources for educational resistance and reclamation.

Folktales in the NTT context are not merely cultural artifacts or entertainment; rather, they are rich pedagogical resources that contain community histories, ecological knowledge of place, and linguistic identity (Wahyudi &

Wuryandani, 2024). Within Indonesia's recently introduced *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum) there is rhetorical support for *kearifan lokal* (local wisdom). However, without a critical decolonial lens, such inclusion risks remaining superficial or touristic (Apple, 2004; Santos, 2014). This study therefore treats the revitalization of folktales in primary schooling as a strategy for moving beyond Western-centered epistemologies toward a more plural and equitable educational paradigm.

What occurs in NTT reflects wider patterns across the Global South: Progressive policy rhetoric can appear liberatory while leaving settler grammars intact. Examining the decolonial pause in this region therefore does more than expose the limits of Indonesian curricular reform; it identifies the point at which reform rhetoric coexists with institutional logics that neutralize local knowledge. The diagnostic framework developed here is intended to extend beyond the archipelago, offering a theoretical blueprint to help other marginalized communities recognize and challenge the systemic mechanisms that marginalize their knowledges. In that context, the research question for this study is: How have East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) folktales been examined, implemented, and theorized within primary education research between 2010 and 2025, and what forms of decolonial praxis emerge from this body of literature?

Significance of the Study: From Local Realities to Global Resurgence

I argue that East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) provides the specific context for this inquiry, but the systemic paralysis it reveals extends far beyond the region and speaks to struggles across the Global South. Examining the decolonial pause in Indonesia, therefore, means addressing a wider crisis in indigenous education (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021). I observe that from the classrooms of Sub-Saharan Africa to Latin America and Northern Europe, communities encounter similar barriers: Progressive policy rhetoric that promises liberation while operating strictly through settler grammars (Calderon, 2014). By mapping a way through this deadlock, I contend that this study transcends regional boundaries. It demands a hard pivot in how we view the living stories of NTT—no longer as quaint cultural artifacts awaiting preservation, but as profound intellectual architecture essential to the global fight for epistemic authority. Furthermore, as the focal point of this inquiry, this research in the NTT context serves as a theoretical blueprint, displaying to other marginalized nations how to name and dismantle the systemic illusions manufactured by their own centralized institutions.

Theoretical Framework

In this review, I draw on three interrelated theoretical lenses: The third space theory, Indigenous storywork, and decolonial theory, which together shape how I interpret the 26 studies included in this systematic review. I use these

frameworks to analyze how folktales function as linguistic, pedagogical, and political tools within Indonesia's primary education system and to clarify the mechanisms through which Indigenous knowledge is either affirmed or marginalized.

Third Space Theory

I draw on third space theory (Bhabha, 1994; Gutiérrez, 2008) to conceptualize the classroom as a hybrid cultural zone where students negotiate meaning between home-based Indigenous epistemologies and the standardized expectations of the national curriculum. This theory helps identify where Indigenous and national knowledge systems intersect and how folktales create openings for students to mobilize their linguistic repertoires and cultural identities in ways that counteract the dominance of centralized national curriculum norms. Third space theory, therefore, provides a lens for examining the hybrid, negotiated learning environments that emerge when Indigenous narratives enter formal schooling.

Indigenous Storywork

I use Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008) to analyze folktales as legitimate knowledge systems grounded in relational, emotional, and cultural dimensions of learning. Storywork is guided by seven principles: Respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy, which inform how stories should be engaged with in educational contexts. This framework allows me to evaluate how the reviewed studies conceptualize the pedagogical role of folktales and whether they treat Indigenous narratives as meaningful intellectual resources rather than as symbolic cultural additions. Storywork also provides a structure for analyzing how storytelling supports identity formation, cultural continuity, and community-rooted learning.

Decolonial Theory

I apply decolonial theory (Battiste, 2013; Mignolo, 2000; Smith, 2021) to interrogate the structural forces that shape how Indigenous knowledge is positioned within national curricula. Three concepts guide my analysis:

1. Decolonial pause—a condition in which reforms appear progressive but leave underlying colonial power structures intact. This concept helps to examine how local wisdom is acknowledged rhetorically in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Indonesia's national curriculum) while remaining constrained by standardized assessments and centralized policy logics.

2. Settler grammars—The curricular and institutional logics that privilege dominant epistemologies and render Indigenous ways illegible (Calderon, 2014). This concept helps analyze how policy documents, textbooks, and assessment systems define what counts as valid knowledge.
3. Subaltern praxis—The everyday strategies through which marginalized communities reclaim epistemic agency within restrictive systems (Mignolo, 2000; Santos, 2014). This concept guides my interpretation of how Indigenous knowledge is positioned within broader structures of power. Decolonial theory provides the political and structural lens necessary to understand the tensions between policy rhetoric and classroom reality.

Integration of Framework

These three frameworks operate together to guide the analytical process:

- Third space theory highlights the hybrid learning spaces created when Indigenous narratives enter the classroom.
- Indigenous storywork provides the ethical and pedagogical grounding for understanding folktales as knowledge systems.
- Decolonial theory exposes the structural conditions that shape how these narratives are positioned within national education

Together they allow me to examine not only how folktales appear in the literature, but also how power, identity, and epistemic authority are negotiated through them.

Literature Review

Research on Indigenous knowledge and curriculum reform in Indonesia has expanded over the past decade, yet scholarship focusing specifically on East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) remains limited, fragmented, and uneven in methodological depth. This literature review synthesizes existing research to establish the empirical and conceptual foundations for the present systematic review. Three major strands emerge: (1) critiques of epistemic hierarchies in Indonesian education, (2) the pedagogical value of Indigenous storytelling, and (3) systemic barriers that limit meaningful integration of local knowledge in primary schools. Together, these strands reveal both the potential and the persistent constraints surrounding the use of NTT folktales in formal education.

Decolonizing the Curriculum: Challenging Epistemic Hierarchies

A substantial body of research critiques the dominance of Western and Java-centric epistemologies in Indonesia's national curriculum. Scholars argue

that centralized standards often marginalize local knowledge systems by framing them as supplementary or unscientific (Aditomo, 2024; Smith, 2021). Studies highlight how curricular centralization produces what some describe as epistemic erasure, where Indigenous languages, ecological knowledge, and oral traditions are overshadowed by standardized literacy and numeracy benchmarks (Apple, 2004; Goeman, 2013).

Research specific to NTT documents how these hierarchies shape classroom practice. Talok et al. (2024), for example, found that local narratives were often included only as decorative content rather than as core learning materials. Anumenechi and Jaga (2025) also described how Indigenous knowledge is frequently reduced to symbolic gestures that do not alter the underlying structure of the curriculum. Thus, across these studies, a consistent finding emerges: Although policy documents reference “local wisdom,” implementation rarely disrupts the deeper structures of curricular authority (Citraningtyas, 2017). This gap between rhetoric and practice underscores the need for a systematic review that examines how folktales are actually used—and constrained—within primary education.

Indigenous Storywork and the Pedagogical Value of Folktales

Research on Indigenous storytelling in Indonesia and the broader Global South demonstrates that folktales serve as powerful pedagogical tools. Studies show that storytelling supports language development, cultural identity, moral reasoning, and ecological understanding (Archibald, 2008; Cornassel, 2012). In NTT, folktales such as *Natoni* (ritual form of poetic speech performed in customary ceremonies), *Nunduk Loke Nggerang* (a traditional oral narrative recounting the sacrificial origin of a human skin drum), and regional origin stories encode complex linguistic structures and environmental knowledge that are rarely acknowledged in mainstream curricula (Benu & Daar, 2023; Benu et al., 2025; Hägerdal, 2023; Rahu, 2021).

Empirical studies in primary schools show that multimodal storytelling—such as photo-story projects, dramatization, and visual mapping—enhances student engagement and strengthens connections to community knowledge. Ke Lomi et al. (2025) found that photo-storytelling based on South Amarasi folklore improved students’ sequencing skills and confidence. Jaga (2017) reported that storytelling activities improved vocabulary acquisition and verbal fluency among second semester students at university level in Timor island.

Research also indicates that storytelling supports multilingual development, particularly when teachers draw on students’ home languages as cognitive resources (Arsenault et al., 2019; Byrd, 2013; Talok et al., 2024). These findings align with Indigenous storywork principles, which emphasize relationality, holism, and the integration of emotional and cultural dimensions of learning. Despite these promising findings, the literature reveals a gap: Few studies examine storytelling

as a decolonial practice. Most focus on literacy outcomes or cultural preservation rather than on how folktales challenge epistemic hierarchies or disrupt standardized curricular norms.

Systemic Barriers and the Risk of Tokenism Inclusion

A third strand of research highlights the structural barriers that limit the integration of Indigenous knowledge in Indonesian schools. Studies consistently report that teachers face pressure to prioritize standardized assessments, which often devalue or ignore local narratives (Hoinbala et al., 2025; Khairunisa & Wahab, 2019; Pian, 2018). Research on the Kurikulum Merdeka shows that while the curriculum encourages contextualized learning, implementation is hindered by limited teacher training, lack of culturally relevant materials, and persistent reliance on centralized textbooks (Aditomo, 2024; Muttaqin et al., 2015; Utami & Suswanto, 2022).

Several studies describe this tension as a form of tokenistic multiculturalism, where folktales are included superficially without shifting underlying power structures (Gorski, 2006; Kennedy et al., 2019; Masta, 2018). This concern aligns with broader critiques of the “decolonial pause,” in which progressive reforms stall at the level of discourse rather than practice. Research from NTT further shows that teachers often lack assessment tools that recognize Indigenous knowledge, leading to the marginalization of local content in formal evaluation (Hoinbala et al., 2025; Mardhotilla et al., 2020; Nggalu Bali et al., 2022).

Gaps in the Literature

Across these strands, several gaps become evident:

1. Lack of systematic synthesis. Existing studies are scattered across linguistics, pedagogy, and policy, with no comprehensive review of how NTT folktales are used in primary education.
2. Limited focus on decolonial praxis. Few studies analyze folktales as tools for challenging epistemic hierarchies or resisting curricular centralization.
3. Insufficient attention to teacher agency. Research rarely examines how teachers navigate constraints or enact subaltern praxis within restrictive systems.
4. Minimal integration of linguistic, pedagogical, and political dimensions. Studies often focus on one dimension without considering how they interact.
5. Lack of empirical examples from classrooms. Many studies discuss folktales conceptually but provide limited evidence of actual classroom practice.

These gaps justify the need for a systematic review that not only maps existing research but also analyzes how folktales operate across linguistic, pedagogical, and political domains.

This review is timely for three reasons. First, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has renewed national interest in contextualized learning; yet, its implementation remains uneven. Second, global movements for decolonizing education have highlighted the urgency of revitalizing Indigenous knowledge systems. Third, NTT remains underrepresented in Indonesian educational research, despite its rich linguistic and cultural diversity. By synthesizing 26 studies across a 15-year period, this review provides a comprehensive analysis of how folktales function within primary education and identifies pathways for reclaiming epistemic authority in marginalized regions.

Methodology

This methodology section outlines the systematic procedures used to identify, select, and synthesize research on East Nusa Tenggara folktales in primary education. It establishes the review design, search strategy, screening criteria, and analytical approach that guided the synthesis of literature published between 2010 and 2025.

Review Design

This study employs a systematic review design, guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021). A systematic review is appropriate for this topic because research on East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) folktales is dispersed across linguistics, pedagogy, and policy studies, with no existing synthesis that examines how these narratives function within primary education. PRISMA provides the transparency and reproducibility necessary to map this fragmented field, minimize selection bias, and clarify how folktales have been examined, implemented, and theorized between 2010 and 2025. This review addresses the research questions: How have East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) folktales been examined, implemented, and theorized within primary education research between 2010 and 2025, and what forms of decolonial praxis emerge from this body of literature?

Researcher Positionality

As a woman from the Manggarai community of East Nusa Tenggara, my relationship to this topic is not neutral. My lived experience, linguistic background, and cultural obligations shape how I interpret Indigenous narratives and how I understand the tensions between local epistemologies and national curricular

structures. In Indigenous and decolonial methodologies, such positionality is not a bias to be erased but a standpoint to be acknowledged (Kovach, 2021; Norova & Gutiérrez, 2024; Sibbald et al., 2025).

To minimize interpretive bias within a systematic review framework, I implemented the following safeguards. First, I applied transparent inclusion/exclusion criteria (Table 1) to prevent selective sampling. Second, I conducted a dual-stage screening (title/abstract-full text) to ensure consistency in study selection. Third, I used a standardized data extraction template (author, year, method, sample, and findings) to maintain uniformity across sources. Fourth, I intentionally separated description from interpretation: Descriptive patterns appear in the Findings section, while theoretical analysis is reserved for the Discussion. Finally, I anchored interpretation in three empirical benchmarks (linguistic, pedagogical, and policy-practice) to ensure that conclusions were grounded in documented evidence rather than personal assumptions. Together, these measures clarify my positional standpoint while upholding methodological rigor.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across global and national databases to capture the full scope of research on NTT folktales including Scopus, ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Garuda (Garda Rujukan Digital), Neliti (Indonesia's Research Repository), and Indonesian National University repositories. To ensure transparency and reproducibility, specific Boolean combinations in both English and Indonesian were employed during the retrieval process (detailed in Table 1). To establish temporal and linguistic boundaries, the search was restricted to studies published between 2010-2025, aligning with major educational reforms and the emergence of the Kurikulum Merdeka discourse. Furthermore, to deliberately counter Western-language bias and capture deeply contextualized regional research, studies published in both English and Indonesian were included in the retrieval process.

Table 1
Search Strings Utilized for Database Retrieval

Language Category	Boolean Search Strings
English Strings	“East Nusa Tenggara” OR “NTT” AND “Folktale” “NTT” AND “storytelling” AND “primary school” “local wisdom” AND “Merdeka Curriculum” “Indigenous knowledge” AND “Indonesia” AND “elementary” “Natoni” OR “Nunduk Loke Nggerang” AND “education” “decolonization” AND “curriculum” AND “Indonesia”
Indonesian Strings	“cerita rakyat NTT” AND “sekolah dasar” “kearifan lokal” AND “pendidikan dasar” “cerita rakyat” AND “Kurikulum Merdeka” “pengetahuan adat” AND “literasi”

Screening and Eligibility

The initial search produced 1,482 records. Screening occurred in three stages. All screening and eligibility decisions were conducted by the researcher. To enhance consistency, decision criteria were documented in a screening matrix. Database searches were conducted between 08 March 2025 and 11 August 2025. All searches were completed on 11 August 2025.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

To ensure transparency and consistency in study selection, all full-text articles were evaluated using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria were designed to maintain a clear focus on East Nusa Tenggara

(NTT), primary education, and the decolonial dimensions of integration. Table 2 summarizes the criteria used during the eligibility screening phase.

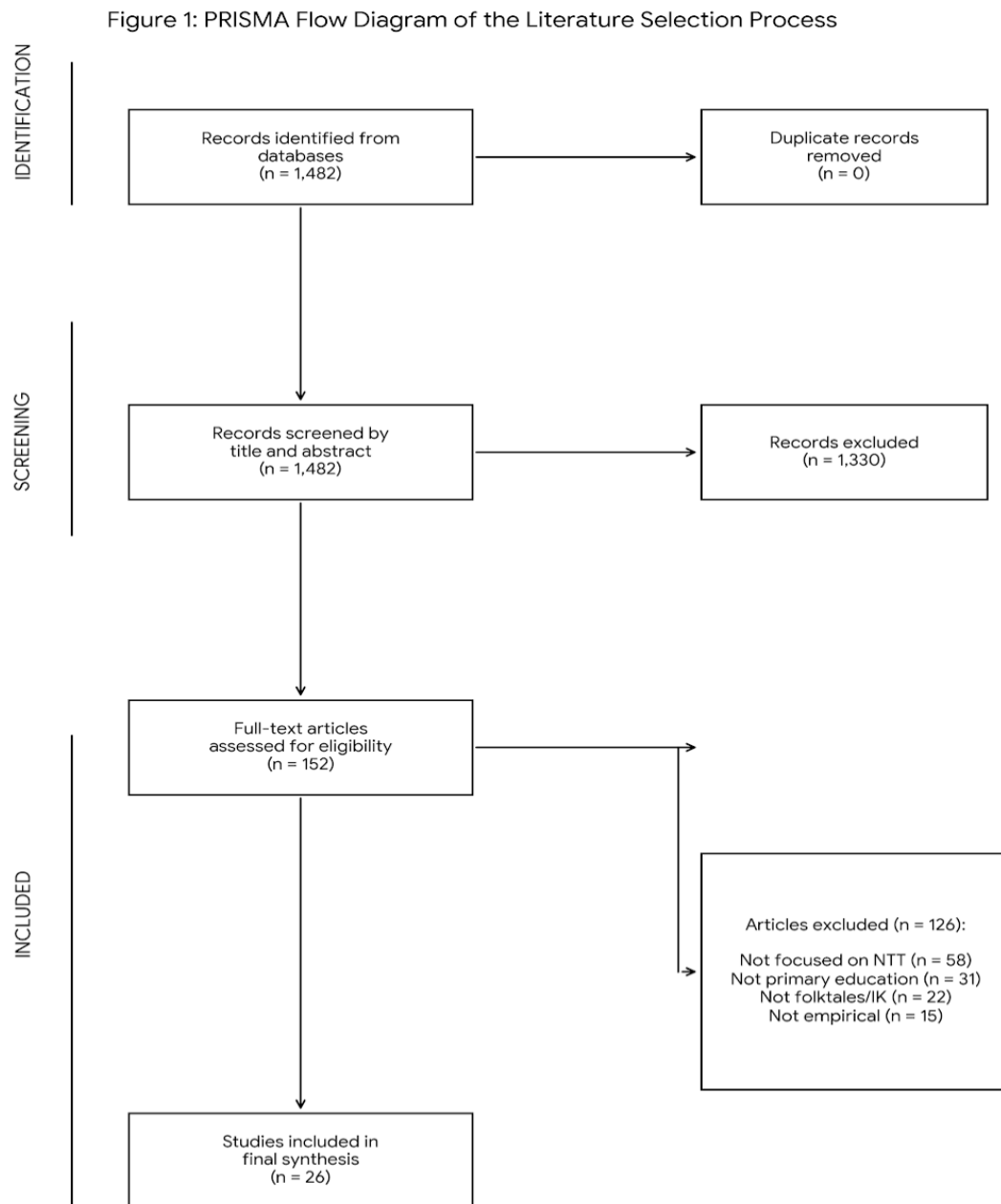
Table 2
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Timeframe	Studies published between 2010 – 2025	Published before 2010
Geographic Focus	Specific to East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Indonesia	General Indonesian context or other provinces
Education Level	Primary Education (Elementary School/SD)	Secondary, Higher Education, or Vocational focus
Core Theme	Folktales, Indigenous Knowledge, Decolonization, Merdeka Curriculum	Purely technical linguistics, non-educational, or STEM-only
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and doctoral dissertations	News articles, blog posts, and non-scholarly reports

I constructed the parameters in Table 2 not merely as administrative filters, but as essential boundaries to ensure that the final corpus remained tightly focused on the socio-cultural and educational realities of East Nusa Tenggara. They also prevented the inclusion of studies that referenced folktales only superficially or without a clear connection to primary education or decolonial inquiry.

PRISMA Flow of Study Selection

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram summarizing the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process.

Figure 1*PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Literature Selection Process*

Data Extraction

A standardized extraction template was used to ensure consistency across the dataset. For each included study, I systematically recorded the author or authors, publication year, research study type, methodology, sample and educational setting, focus, and key findings. Table 3 presents the key characteristics and descriptive findings of the 26 studies included in the Final PRISMA synthesis

Table 3
Summary of the 26 Included Studies

No.	Author(s) & Year	Study Type	Methodology	Sample / Setting	Focus	Key Descriptive Finding
1	Benu & Daar (2023)	Linguistic study	Descriptive morphosyntactic analysis	Dawan language speakers, West Timor, NTT	Causative constructions in Dawan	Indigenous languages contain complex morphosyntactic structures not reflected in national literacy standards.
2	Benu et al. (2025)	Linguistic-cultural study	Ethnolinguistic analysis	Atoin Meto communities, West Timor, NTT	<i>Natoni</i> oral tradition	Ecological metaphors encode environmental knowledge within oral storytelling.
3	Citraningtyas (2017)	Literacy study	Reader-response analysis	Indonesian primary students	Folktale reconstruction	Students interpret folktales as moral and cultural texts.
4	Hägerdal (2023)	Historical-cultural study	Archival analysis	Belu, Timor, NTT	Colonial knowledge production	Colonial archives shaped contemporary understandings of Timorese narratives.
5	Ke Lomi et al. (2025)	Pedagogical intervention	Classroom action research	South Amarasi, NTT primary students	Photo Story-telling	Multimodal storytelling improved English speaking and cultural engagement.

No.	Author(s) & Year	Study Type	Methodology	Sample / Setting	Focus	Key Descriptive Finding
6	Sari & Syamsi (2022)	Folklore study	Textual analysis	Indonesian folklore corpus	"Timun Mas" narrative	Folklore contains themes of resistance and gendered agency.
7	Jaga et al. (2023)	Sociolinguistic study	Qualitative field study	Kupang City, NTT public spaces	Graffiti as communication	Public texts reflect multilingual identity and youth expression.
8	Talok et al. (2024)	Socio-linguistic study	Linguistic landscape analysis	NTT public signage	English pronunciation	Public English displays reveal local phonological patterns.
9	Hoinbala et al. (2025)	Teacher education study	Survey + interviews	NTT EFL teachers	Language Assessment Literacy	Teachers lack assessment tools aligned with local linguistic realities.
10	Muttaqin et al. (2015)	Policy study	Mixed-methods	Rural Indonesian provinces incl. NTT	Decentralization & education	Resource disparities limit curriculum implementation in rural areas.
11	Rambe & Rambe (2021)	Textbook analysis	Content analysis	Indonesian EFL textbooks	Source culture representation	Local cultures are minimally represented in national textbooks.
12	Carolina, et al. (2024)	Curriculum study	Qualitative case study	Indonesian primary schools	Local resource integration	Teachers adapt local materials inconsistently under Merdeka Curriculum.
13	Wahyudi & Wuryandani (2024)	Character education study	Qualitative study	Indonesian primary schools	Cultural values in Merdeka Curriculum	Cultural integration depends on teacher initiative.
14	Risniyanti & Setiawan (2022)	Curriculum implementation study	Policy review	Indonesian schools	Kurikulum Merdeka	Implementation varies widely across regions.
15	Utami et al. (2024)	History curriculum study	Document analysis	Indonesian curriculum documents	Decolonizing history	Local histories remain under-represented in

No.	Author(s) & Year	Study Type	Methodology	Sample / Setting	Focus	Key Descriptive Finding
						national curriculum.
16	Khairunisa & Wahab (2019)	Character education study	Literature review	Indonesian primary context	Local wisdom & character	Local narratives support moral education.
17	Kusmana et al. (2020)	Teaching materials study	R&D (ADDIE model)	Indonesian primary schools	Folklore-based materials	Folklore materials enhance character education.
18	Juansah et al. (2021)	Literacy study	Material development	Indonesian folklore corpus	Gender equality folktales	Folklore can promote gender-equitable literacy.
19	Zahra et al. (2023)	Instructional design study	R&D	Indonesian primary students	Local wisdom pocket books	Local wisdom materials increase learning interest.
20	Zahro et al. (2020)	Folklore study	Semiotic analysis	Indonesian folktales	Women's portrayal	Folktales encode cultural expectations of femininity.
21	Nurhayati (2016)	Folklore study	Feminist analysis	Indonesian folktales	Femaleness in folklore	Folktales reflect gendered cultural norms.
22	Onodera & Fujii (2024)	Science education study	Lesson design research	Elementary science classes	Folktales & nature	Folktales help students understand human–nature relationships.
23	Otta (2018)	Moral education study	Qualitative thematic analysis	Indonesian folktales corpus	Moral and ethical values in Indonesian folktales	Folktales encode culturally grounded moral reasoning, emphasizing relational responsibility, humility, and communal ethics.
24	Fadhli (2020)	Literacy study	Classroom-based qualitative study	Indonesian primary classrooms	Folktales-based literacy learning	Integrating local folktales increases reading engagement and supports

No.	Author(s) & Year	Study Type	Methodology	Sample / Setting	Focus	Key Descriptive Finding
						culturally relevant literacy development.
25	Hasbi (2024)	Curriculum & pedagogy study	Qualitative case study	Indonesian elementary schools	Local wisdom integration in primary curriculum	Teachers use local narratives to contextualize lessons, but implementation varies due to limited pedagogical guidance.
26	Ramli & Rahman (2024)	Pedagogy study	Conceptual + empirical review	Southeast Asian education context	Culturally responsive and locally grounded pedagogy	Locally rooted pedagogies strengthen identity affirmation and support decolonial classroom practices in Southeast Asia.

Data Analysis

The review employed Thematic Synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) adapted to Indigenous research paradigms (Kovach, 2021). The analytical process proceeded through three sequential stages. Initially, I conducted line-by-line coding of the findings from each included study. This foundational coding facilitated the development of descriptive themes, such as language development, multimodal storytelling, and policy barriers. Finally, I generated overarching analytical themes directly aligned with the study's decolonial theoretical framework.

Application of Benchmarking Lenses

To ensure analytical clarity and anchor interpretations in empirical evidence, I applied three specific benchmarking lenses. First, a linguistic benchmark evaluated claims concerning literacy gaps by cross-referencing them against the documented morphosyntactic complexity of NTT languages. Second, a pedagogical benchmark assessed the feasibility and effectiveness of multimodal storytelling approaches within low-resource educational settings. Finally, a political-practice benchmark analyzed how assessment systems, policy rhetoric,

and structural resource disparities shaped the actual implementation of folktales. Together, these lenses ensured that all theoretical interpretations remained firmly grounded in documented classroom realities rather than abstract assumptions.

Bias Minimization

To enhance transparency and mitigate potential subjectivity, several rigorous strategies were implemented throughout the review process. These included the use of reproducible search strings, the strict application of predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a comprehensive dual-stage screening process. I systematically documented all excluded studies, explicitly separated descriptive findings from theoretical interpretations, and applied multiple empirical benchmarks to avoid single-lens bias. The intentional inclusion of Indonesian-language studies was also prioritized to mitigate English-language bias, thereby strengthening the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the synthesis.

Findings

This section synthesizes findings from 26 studies published between 2010 and 2025 that examined the linguistic, pedagogical, and political dimensions of folktales and local knowledge in Indonesian primary education, with particular attention to NTT contexts. Of the 26 included studies, 6 were classroom interventions/materials, eight were linguistic or ethnolinguistic analyses, seven were policy/curriculum studies, and five were instructional design or materials development studies. The synthesis remains descriptive and focuses on what the studies reported, without theoretical interpretation.

Pillar 1: Linguistic Complexity and Indigenous Epistemologies

Across the reviewed studies, researchers consistently documented the linguistic richness embedded in NTT and Indonesian oral traditions. Several studies analyzed Indigenous languages such as Dawan, Atoin Meto, and other regional varieties, demonstrating that folktales encode complex morphosyntactic, semantic, and ecological knowledge.

Studies on linguistic structure highlighted the cognitive value of Indigenous languages. Benu and Daar (2023) showed that Dawan causative constructions in folktales involve multilayered verb morphology, and that students were able to manipulate these forms when retelling stories. Benu et al. (2025) found that children demonstrated strong recall of ecological metaphors in *Natoni* (oral poetry),

indicating that linguistic and environmental knowledge are intertwined in oral storytelling.

Other studies emphasized the role of home languages in supporting literacy. Citraningtyas (2017) reported that students interpreted folktales as moral and cultural texts, producing more elaborate responses when allowed to draw on familiar linguistic resources. Jaga et al. (2023) and Talok et al. (2024) showed that multilingual public texts and local phonological patterns shape children's everyday literacy environments, reinforcing the relevance of local linguistic repertoires.

Across the corpus, no study described Indigenous languages as barriers to learning. Instead, the literature consistently portrayed NTT folktales and local languages as linguistically rich resources that support vocabulary development, oral fluency, and conceptual understanding.

Pillar 2: Pedagogical Value of Multimodal and Cultural Grounded Storytelling

A second major theme concerns the pedagogical benefits of integrating folktales into classroom instruction. Studies consistently reported that storytelling—especially when combined with multimodal strategies—enhanced student engagement, comprehension, and cultural connection.

Several intervention and classroom-based studies demonstrated positive learning outcomes. Ke Lomi et al. (2025) implemented a photo-storytelling project using South Amarasi folklore and found that students showed improved sequencing skills, confidence in oral presentation, and stronger cultural engagement. Sari & Syamsi (2022) reported that gender-themed folktales helped students identify fairness, empathy, and cooperation. Zahra et al. (2023) and Kusmana et al. (2020) found that local wisdom materials and folklore-based teaching resources increased student interest and supported character education.

Studies on literacy development also highlighted the value of folktales. Juansah et al. (2021) showed that gender-equality folktales supported critical literacy, while Fadhli (2020) found that integrating local folktales increased reading engagement and improved comprehension among primary students. Onodera and Fujii (2024) demonstrated that folktales helped students understand human–nature relationships in science lessons, showing the cross-curricular potential of storytelling. Teachers across several studies described folktales as accessible, low-cost tools that could be adapted to local contexts. However, many studies noted that teachers lacked structured guidance or training on how to integrate storytelling into formal lesson plans, limiting the consistency of implementation.

Pillar 3: Policy Practice Gaps and Structural Barriers

A third theme concerns the systemic constraints that limit the meaningful integration of folktales in primary schools. Studies consistently reported a gap between the policy rhetoric of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and the material realities of classroom practice.

Teacher assessment literacy emerged as a major barrier. Hoinbala et al. (2025) found that teachers struggled to evaluate students' understanding of local stories because assessment rubrics were aligned with national standards rather than local content. Similar concerns were raised by Risniyanti and Setiawan (2022), who reported wide variation in curriculum implementation across regions. Carolina et al. (2024) found that teachers adapted local materials inconsistently due to limited guidance.

Resource disparities also shaped classroom practice. Muttaqin et al. (2015) reported that rural schools relied heavily on centralized textbooks, which rarely included regional narratives. Rambe and Rambe (2021) found that teachers wanted to use folktales but were constrained by time pressures, administrative requirements, and the dominance of national textbooks. Wahyudi and Wuryandani (2024) and Khairunisa and Wahab (2019) similarly noted that cultural content was often used only during special events rather than integrated into core instruction. Across the literature, structural barriers—standardized assessments, resource scarcity, and centralized curricular expectations—were identified as the primary obstacles to integrating folktales meaningfully into everyday teaching.

Teachers Agency and Local Innovation

Despite systemic constraints, several studies highlighted examples of teacher-led innovation. These studies showed that educators in NTT and other Indonesian regions often adapted folktales creatively to support learning. Jaga et al. (2023) described teachers who invited community elders to co-tell stories, strengthening intergenerational knowledge transfer and enhancing students' cultural understanding. Ke Lomi et al. (2025) reported that teachers incorporated local landscapes, family histories, and community experiences into storytelling activities, making lessons more relevant to students' lived realities. Rambe and Rambe (2021) found that teachers used informal discussion circles to help students interpret moral lessons from stories, even when formal curriculum structures did not support such practices.

Studies on local wisdom integration also highlighted teacher agency. Hasbi (2024) found that teachers used local narratives to contextualize lessons, though implementation varied due to limited pedagogical guidance. Zahro et al. (2020) and Nurhayati (2016) showed that teachers used folktales to discuss gender norms and cultural expectations, demonstrating how storytelling can open space for critical reflection.

Overall, these studies illustrate that teachers play an important role in sustaining Indigenous knowledge and adapting folktales to classroom needs, even within restrictive institutional environments.

Limited Explicit Engagement with Decolonial Perspectives

While many studies documented the cultural and pedagogical value of folktales, few explicitly framed storytelling as a decolonial practice. Most studies focused on literacy outcomes, cultural preservation, or classroom engagement rather than on how folktales challenge dominant knowledge structures.

Only a small subset of studies referenced concepts such as epistemic authority, curricular centralization, or Indigenous sovereignty. Utami et al. (2024) noted that local histories remain underrepresented in national curriculum documents. Hägerdal (2023) showed how colonial archives shaped contemporary understandings of Timorese narratives. Otta (2018) and Dahal and Bhatta (2021) emphasized moral and ethical values but did not frame these within decolonial discourse.

More explicit engagement appeared in a few recent works. Aditomo (2024) critiqued the *Merdeka* (freedom) curriculum for maintaining centralized control over content selection, while Anumenechi and Jaga (2025) described local narratives as tools for resisting cultural homogenization. Ramli and Rahman (2024) argued that locally grounded pedagogies strengthen identity affirmation and support decolonial classroom practices in Southeast Asia.

Across the corpus, however, decolonial perspectives remained largely implicit. This gap highlights the need for a review that synthesizes the decolonial dimensions of storytelling—an aim addressed in the present study.

Discussion

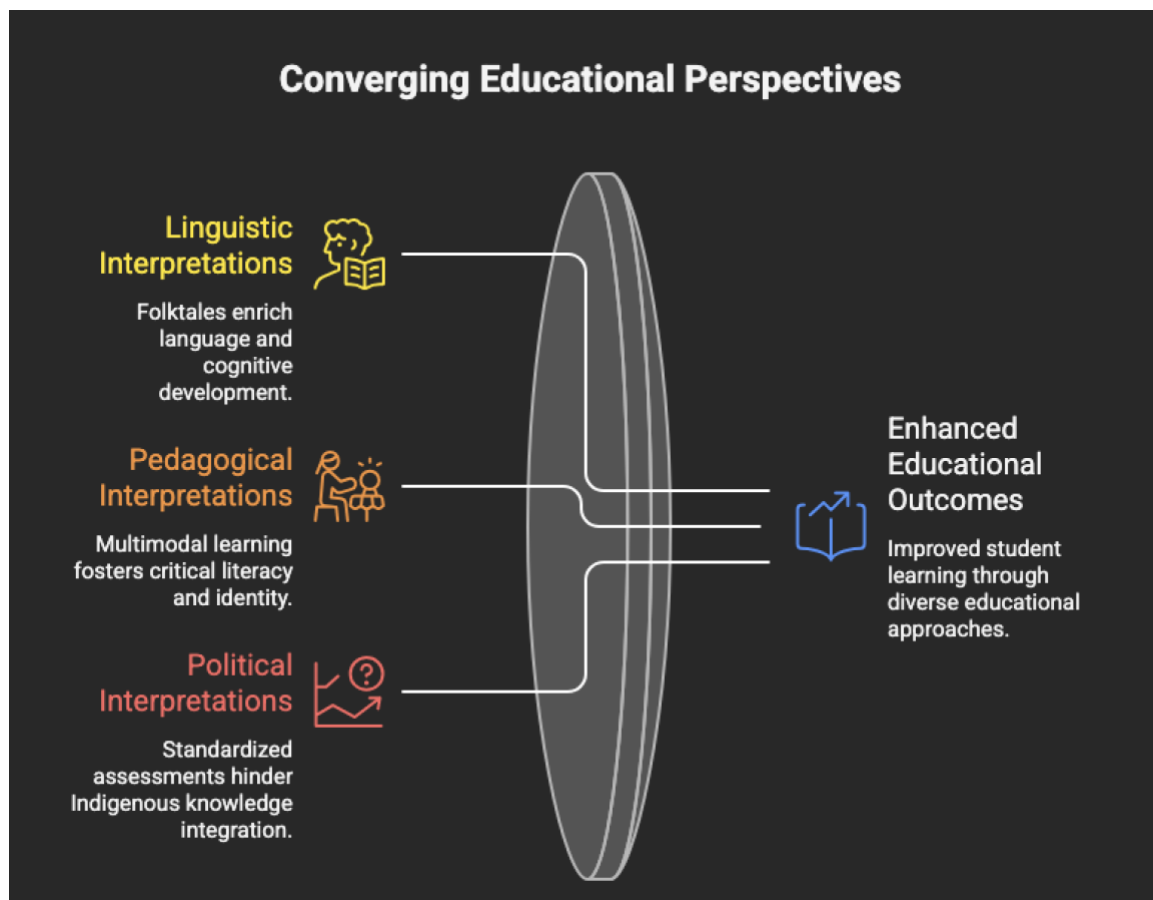
The findings of this systematic review reveal that East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) folktales occupy a complex position within Indonesia's primary education landscape. I interpret these findings as evidence that folktales hold significant linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural value, yet their transformative potential remains constrained by structural forces that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge in schools. In addressing the research question—How are NTT folktales studied, implemented, and interpreted within primary education? —I argue that, through the combined lenses of Third Space Theory, Indigenous Storywork, and Decolonial Theory, the 26 studies collectively show how folktales create openings for epistemic reclamation while simultaneously exposing the limits of curricular reform (see Table 1 for the full corpus).

Interpreting the Findings Through Three Lenses

The following discussion examines linguistic, pedagogical, and political interpretations of folktales to illustrate how these perspectives converge in shaping educational outcomes. Figure 2 presents a visualization across the interpretive domains.

Figure 2

Visualization of the Relationships across Three Interpretive Domains



Linguistic Interpretations: Folktales as Sites of Cognitive and Epistemic Richness

Across the reviewed studies (see Table 1), folktales consistently emerged as linguistically dense resources that support vocabulary development, narrative competence, and conceptual understanding (Fadhli, 2020; Juansah et al., 2021; Zahra et al., 2023). The morphosyntactic complexity documented in Dawan and Natoni oral traditions (Benu & Daar, 2023; Benu et al., 2025) challenges deficit

narratives that frame Indigenous languages as obstacles to national literacy. Instead, these languages encode ecological knowledge, relational ethics, and sophisticated grammatical structures that exceed the narrow benchmarks of standardized Indonesian.

I interpret these findings as evidence that folktales create hybrid linguistic environments where students mobilize home-based repertoires to make sense of school-based texts (Hoinbala et al., 2025; Rambe & Rambe, 2021). When teachers allow students to retell stories in their own languages or draw on local metaphors, they open a space where Indigenous epistemologies can coexist with national curriculum expectations (Hoinbala et al., 2025; Rambe & Rambe, 2021). Yet the fragility of these spaces—often dependent on individual teacher initiative—reveals the absence of institutional structures that recognize Indigenous linguistic capital as legitimate academic knowledge (Carolina et al., 2024; Hasbi, 2024).

Pedagogical Interpretations: Multimodal Storywork and Culturally Grounded Learning

Multimodal storywork—photo-storytelling, dramatization, and visual mapping—consistently enhances student engagement, comprehension, and identity formation (Fadhli, 2020; Ke Lomi et al., 2025; Zahro et al., 2020). Textual and folklore analyses further show that folktales carry moral, gendered, and resistance themes that can be mobilized for critical literacy and character education (Nurhayati, 2016; Sari & Syamsi, 2022; Zahro et al., 2020). I interpret the unevenness of implementation as evidence of systemic gaps: Classroom interventions report positive outcomes (Juansah et al., 2021; Ke Lomi et al., 2025). At the same time, curriculum case studies document inconsistent adaptation under Kurikulum Merdeka and limited teacher preparedness (Carolina et al., 2024; Hoinbala et al., 2025; Wahyudi & Wuryandani, 2024). Without targeted teacher training, ethical engagement protocols, and curricular guidance, folktales risk becoming cultural display rather than rigorous pedagogical tools; this gap underscores the need to embed Indigenous storywork in teacher education and to develop community-school protocols for ethical collaboration (Hasbi, 2024; Paris, 2012; Ramli & Rahman, 2024).

Political Interpretations: The Assessment Barrier and the Decolonial Pause

A persistent structural barrier across the corpus is the dominance of standardized assessments, centralized textbooks, and narrow definitions of academic achievement. Policy analyses document resource disparities and centralization that limit local curricular integration (Muttaqin et al., 2015; Risniyanti & Setiawan, 2022; Utami & Suswanto, 2022). Although Kurikulum Merdeka rhetorically supports contextualized learning, assessment regimes continue to privilege national standards, producing what decolonial scholars call a “decolonial

pause” in which Indigenous knowledge is symbolically acknowledged but academically peripheral (Hägerdal, 2023; Hoinbala et al., 2025).

I interpret the term “decolonial pause” here as a condition in which curricular reforms rhetorically acknowledge local wisdom but fail to alter the institutional logics that continue to privilege centralized, settler epistemologies. This pause is characterized by (a) rhetorical inclusion of local content without aligned assessment or teacher support and (b) the persistence of standardized practices that neutralize Indigenous knowledge. Evidence of this pattern appears in policy-implementation studies and classroom research from NTT (Hoinbala et al., 2025; Muttaqin et al., 2015).

I interpret this dynamic as the operation of settler grammars too: Mechanisms that define what counts as legitimate knowledge in schools. When teachers cannot assess Indigenous knowledge using official rubrics, folktales become pedagogical ornaments—visible in ceremonies but marginal in core instruction and evaluation. This structural contradiction helps explain why teacher innovations remain localized and difficult to scale without systemic policy change (Hasbi, 2024; Muttaqin et al., 2015).

Teacher Agency and Subaltern Praxis

Despite structural constraints, multiple studies document teacher-led innovations that enact subaltern praxis. Teachers who invite elders, adapt stories to local landscapes, or create informal discussion circles demonstrate how folktales can be used to resist curricular homogenization and reclaim epistemic authority (Hasbi, 2024; Ke Lomi et al., 2025; Rambe & Rambe, 2021). These practices show that teachers are active agents of change, but their impact is uneven and contingent on individual initiative and local resources. Scaling such praxis requires institutional recognition, targeted professional development, and mechanisms for community-school collaboration (Carolina et al., 2024; Hoinbala et al., 2025).

Theoretical Synthesis

Third space theory explains how students mobilize home repertoires in hybrid classroom interactions (Bhabha, 1994; Sari & Syamsi, 2022); Indigenous storywork clarifies the relational and multimodal mechanisms of learning (Archibald, 2008; Ke Lomi et al., 2025); and decolonial theory highlights structural constraints such as settler grammars and assessment regimes (Hägerdal, 2023; Utami et al., 2024). Together, these lenses account for why folktales generate pedagogical possibility while remaining constrained by centralized curricular logics (Muttaqin et al., 2015).

Global South Relevance

Although this review focuses on NTT, the findings resonate with broader struggles across the Global South. In many regions, Indigenous knowledge is acknowledged rhetorically but marginalized in practice due to standardized assessments, centralized curricula, and resource disparities. The tensions documented in NTT mirror those found in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and Indigenous communities in Northern Europe. Thus, the diagnostic patterns identified—particularly the “decolonial pause” and the assessment barrier—resonate across the Global South; the framework offered here is therefore intended as a transferable analytic tool for other contexts seeking to reclaim epistemic authority through local narratives.

Practical Implication

The interpretive synthesis above clarifies both the pedagogical promise and the structural limits of folktale integration. The following practical implications outline concrete, classroom-level and policy-oriented steps that can move practice beyond symbolic inclusion toward sustained, decolonial classroom change:

1. **Community Elder Story Circles.** Invite elders to share stories in original languages, followed by student reflection. This strengthens intergenerational knowledge transfer and validates Indigenous epistemologies.
2. **Multimodal Folktale Mapping.** Use drawings, photos, and local landmarks to map story settings and characters, pair mapping with short presentation, helping students connect narratives to lived environments.
3. **Folktale-Based Assessment Tasks.** Develop rubrics that evaluate retelling, interpretation, and moral reasoning based on local stories, (e.g., narrative sequencing, cultural reasoning, oral fluency); co-design rubrics with community elders to provide alternative assessment pathways aligned with Indigenous knowledge systems.
4. **Teacher Training in Indigenous Pedagogies.** Integrate storywork principles into professional development (ethical engagement, reciprocity, multimodality) and model low-cost classroom activities so teachers can engage with folktales ethically and pedagogically.

A concrete classroom model exemplar would be for a teacher to implement a four-week photo-storytelling unit based on local folktales, with weekly multimodal tasks (oral retelling, photo mapping, dramatization, reflective journal) and a rubric co-designed with community elders to assess narrative sequencing, oral fluency, visual composition, and cultural reasoning (see Ke Lomi et al., 2025).

Limitations and Future Research

This review is limited by the availability of published studies on NTT, the uneven methodological quality of existing research, and the exclusion of grey literature, which may introduce publication bias. Although PRISMA procedures were followed, the screening process may still reflect selection bias, particularly given the predominance of studies published in Indonesian and English. Future research should examine classroom-based interventions, teacher training models, and community-led curriculum design to deepen understanding of how folktales can support decolonial praxis in primary education.

Conclusion

This systematic review synthesized 26 empirical studies on East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) folktales and primary education. I conclude that folktales constitute substantive epistemic resources, encoding complex morphosyntactic patterns, ecological knowledge, and relational ethics that support vocabulary, narrative competence, and place-based learning. Pedagogically, multimodal storywork (photo-storytelling, dramatization, and mapping) strengthens engagement, identity, and relational learning when enacted with community involvement.

However, the transformative potential of these practices is routinely constrained by centralized assessment regimes, standardized curricula, and uneven teacher preparation—a dynamic I identify as a “decolonial pause” in which local knowledge is rhetorically acknowledged but not validated in assessment or curricular authority. To move beyond symbolic inclusion, I recommend three priorities: (1) assessment reform that recognizes multimodal and culturally grounded competencies; (2) targeted teacher education in Indigenous storywork and ethical community engagement; and (3) support for community-led curriculum design that positions elders as co-creators.

For research, I call for longitudinal, classroom-based mixed-methods studies and comparative work across regions to test scalability and inform policy translation. Only by aligning classroom innovation with institutional incentives can folktales shift from ceremonial recognition to sustained curricular practice that advances linguistic justice and decolonial learning.

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AI Use Statement

The author confirms that the conceptual framework, theoretical arguments, and critical synthesis of the 26 primary sources presented in this manuscript are entirely the original work of the author. A generative AI tool (Grammarly) was utilized solely for the purpose of technical editing, including grammar correction and refining sentence structure for academic fluency. At no point were AI tools used to generate original research findings, conduct data analysis, or formulate the decolonial critiques central to this study. The author maintains full responsibility for the intellectual content and accuracy of the final manuscript.

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