

REVIEW ARTICLE

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Indonesian Folktales

ALIBASAH, MARGARET MUTH. *Indonesian Folk Tales*. Jakarta: Djambatan, 1998 (7th edition). vi + 99 pages. Illustrations, word list. Paper \$2.00; ISBN 979-428-333-9.

ALIBASAH, MARGARET MUTH. *Indonesian Mouse Deer Fables*. Jakarta: Djambatan, 1994 (3rd edition). vi + 62 pages. Illustrations, word list. Paper US\$1.50; ISBN 979-428-230-8.

ALIBASAH, MARGARET MUTH. *Folk Tales from Bali and Lombok*. Jakarta: Djambatan, 1990 (3rd edition). 85 pages. Map, illustrations. Paper US\$2.00. ISBN 979-428-350-9.

AMAN, S. D. B. *Folk Tales from Indonesia*. Jakarta: Djambatan, 1999 (8th edition). vii + 130 pages. Map, illustrations, vocabulary. Paper US\$2.50; ISBN 979-428-351-7.

AMAN, S. D. B. *More Folk Tales from Indonesia*. Jakarta: Djambatan, 1998. viii + 144 pages. Map, illustrations, vocabulary. Paper US\$3.00; ISBN 979-428-320-7.

AMAN, S. D. B. *Other Folk Tales from Indonesia*. Jakarta: Djambatan, 2000 (2nd edition). vii + 119 pages. Illustrations, vocabulary. Paper US\$2.50; ISBN 979-428-401-7.

THE TWO SERIES of Indonesian folktales under review are not intended for folklore researchers but for general readers and especially for tourists and Indonesian students of English. It is certainly a great help for the Indonesian students of English that there are English-Indonesian word lists at the end of each volume, except for the one from Bali and Lombok.

The volumes, however, are treasure chests full of inspiration for researchers. Here we find no less than 88 good tales from many different parts of the country. Indonesia is geographically complicated, and one is thankful for the many maps showing from which area a certain tale comes. All the volumes are also illustrated with photographs and/or superb drawings. It is easy to see that the artists for the books were also inspired by the tales. Because the series can be quite helpful to researchers, it would be a good idea indeed to republish the series in two volumes if this were done in cooperation with a folklorist who could provide adequate comments on the tales. An account of the use of folklore on all levels of Indonesia society would be most welcome as well as detailed presentations of the two editors.

A researcher not familiar with the Indonesian language would also need some explanations. What, for instance, do the many titles indicate? And how many foreign readers know that a *ksatria* is a member of the Indian warrior caste? Perhaps some of the animals mentioned do not have any English name, but if that is so, a short description of each ought to be given.

If the two series are republished—which I sincerely hope they will—they ought to be copyedited as well. Forms like “clapsed” for clapped and “deathly” for deadly are not unintelligible, just slightly disturbing. It is harder to understand words like “spatter” and “holz,” but the context makes me assume that these are the German words *später* (“later”) and *Holz* (“wood”) that have sneaked into the English text. While checking the language, readability should also be considered. The tale “Cindu Mata” in AMAN 1998, for example, is not intelligible for a foreign reader in the form it currently appears.

All this is of very little importance, however, compared to the many

interesting tales presented in the two series.

As would be expected, we find many local legends telling us how a lake, a mountain, a river, or a strait came into being or got its name. Thus we learn in ALIBASAH 1998 (11) that a dark rock outside the coast of Sumatra is the petrified ship of an unthankful son who refused to acknowledge his own mother. The island Timor according to a story in AMAN 1998 (112) is the body of a crocodile that turned into a fertile island in order to thank a boy who rescued it when it was almost killed by the heat. If you do not believe this, just look at a map of Timor and you will see very clearly that it still has the form of the crocodile's body.

It is certainly not only local legends that are represented, but also several well-known migratory tales. Nobody with some knowledge of folktales could be astonished to hear that in AMAN 1999 the seventh son of a certain family was born as a frog. Then comes a section with local color that shows that the teller is of a seafaring nation. The frog is allowed to go on a trade tour on his brothers' vessel. Despite the fact that the frog rescues the ship in a storm, his brothers set him ashore on an uninhabited island. He grows melons there, but when they are ripe a giant steals them. The frog accuses the giant of theft and gets a magic axe as a fine. With that axe one can achieve anything, and when his brothers are going to sail past the island on their way home, the frog stops the wind and the brothers have to pick up the little one.

The rest of the story is a most common one. When the frog's mother is sent to ask the king for one of his daughters as a wife for her peculiar son, the king's answer is a flat "No!" The "No!" is repeated when the mother tries again, but on the third attempt the youngest princess agrees to marry the frog. When she discovers that her husband is a handsome young man, she burns the frog's skin. This almost kills her husband, but she rescues him by daubing him with coconut milk. They then lived happily ever after.

The husband is found in different disguises in many tales of this kind, and it is not astonishing to find him as a cuscus in ALIBASAH 1998. Still in his cuscus shape he marries the ninth daughter of a fisherman. When his wife finds his cuscus skin, he changes and remains a handsome young man, and the eight elder sisters get terribly envious of their fortunate younger sister. When the husband comes back from a trade tour on a golden ship, they trickily induce their sister to swing in a tree near the seashore. They swing her so high that her long, thick hair gets entangled with the branches, and then they just leave her hanging by her hair. Her husband untangles her and sets her free. One would have expected that the evil sisters were punished for their murderous cruelty, but surprisingly enough they are forgiven when they admit their crime.

In these two stories the man thus appears as two different animals, but in “Joko Kendil” in *AMAN* 2000 he is not an animal at all but an earthen rice pot! He even makes use of his peculiar shape. When people do not discover that he is alive, they occasionally put food into him, and then he carries the food home and gives it to his poor, widowed mother.

Otherwise the story is of the usual kind. The youngest princess marries him when his mother goes to woo one of the king’s daughters for him. The other princesses tease her, and when the man appears in his true, extremely handsome shape at a tournament, they point at him and say that she ought to have married a man like that. The girl gets angry and runs home. In her anger she smashes a rice pot that she finds in a corner. After a while her husband returns and thanks her for having rescued him. Then they live happily with one another.

In her book *The Maiden of Many Nations: The Skymaiden Who Married a Man from Earth*,¹ Hazel J. Wrigglesworth relates no less than 29 versions of the Skymaiden tale from the Philippines, both in the original language and in English. In an appendix there is also one tale from Japan and eight from mainland Southeast Asia but none from Indonesia.

The story of the Skymaiden is one of the world’s most widespread migratory tales, and so it is not surprising that it is told in Indonesia as well. Finding several examples in the series under review, one wonders if perhaps there are just as many versions to collect and publish in Indonesia as in the Philippines?

Not all the Skymaiden tales found in the books under review can be summarized here, but the short descriptions given below will suffice to show how different such stories may be despite the fact that the Skymaiden is found in all of them.

In many parts of the world the maiden and her sisters come down to earth in the shape of birds. In the northern parts of Europe and Asia the birds are almost always swans, but in other areas they may be anything from parrots to emus. In *AMAN* 1999 (101) the Skymaidens do not appear as birds, however, but seemingly as beautiful young girls. They have no wings but fly with the help of shawls. A young man steals the shawl of the youngest girl, and when she cries because she cannot fly home, he asks her to marry him. The shawl he stole is hidden under the rice in the barn. The wife does not find it because she does not use the rice in the barn. She just puts a single ear in a pot and boils it, yet the pot is full of cooked rice every day. The husband becomes curious and lifts the lid of the pot despite the fact that his wife has forbidden him to do so. The rice magic does then not function any longer, so the wife has to fetch rice in the barn. She finds her shawl, ascends to heaven and never comes back.

In AMAN 2000 (25) a poor young man killed a dangerous snake when he was in the forest collecting wood. He heard some voices shout for joy, and when he came home, he found a sumptuous meal but was unable to understand where it came from. The following day he saw seven lovely girls coming from the river carrying good food, which they put down at his hut. He followed them back to the river and saw them hang their veils on a tree. While they were playing in the water, he put one veil into his pocket. When they came up again, six of the girls put on their veils and floated up into the air, but the youngest one could not because she could not find her veil. When the man approached her, she asked him for help, and he offered her marriage. She agreed but also said that she would vanish if ever he asked her to dance.

Because the man had been brave enough to kill the dangerous snake, the king now made him village headman and gave a big party to celebrate this. At the party the king ordered the man to let his wife dance. He had to obey the king, but when he asked the Skymaiden to dance she slowly elevated and vanished into the sky forever.

The maidens come down from the sky as swans in AMAN 2000 (81) and as usual a man takes one of the feather shrouds and marries the owner. They live happily and have a son. The man is told that his wife will go back to heaven if he breaks one of her hairs when he is looking for lice(!) on her head. One day he happens to break a hair, and the wife flies up into the air. The husband takes his son along on a search for the husband's wife, whom they find. The husband and wife stay together in heaven, but the son returns to earth. When he leaves, the high god gives him a parcel to open down on earth. In the parcel he finds a maiden to marry, and she brings a smaller parcel along. That parcel contains seeds of rice, durian, mango, and many other fruits. The seeds are sown and the entire area reaps fruit abundantly.

An adventurous quest for the vanished wife is often found in Skymaiden stories. In AMAN 1998 (86) the quest totally overshadows the beginning of the tale. It is extremely long and only part of it will be summarized here to show how very complicated it is.

In the story the Skymaiden leaves the earth because she feels lost and lonely, but her husband sets out to find her. With the aid of birds, he reaches the abode of a princess who owns a big bird that can carry him to heaven. The princess falls in love with him, and he has to promise to return and marry her when he has been to the sky. He mounts the bird, but a whirlwind blows him off and he falls down in a village where he is well received. One day he hears the sound of a drum and is told that the drum announces that his wife is going to be married in the sky, and he decides to get her back even if he has to fight for her. The following day he plays with a boy who is his

own son, and he gives him a ring. When the mother sees the ring she realizes that her husband has come to fetch her, and she goes to meet him.

They are glad to see each other again, and all three of them go to heaven to see the wife's family. There is a terrible fight with the rival and his men, and although they are heavenly beings they are all killed. Now husband, wife, and son live in peace until the big bird reminds the hero of his promise to return and marry its mistress. He leaves on the back of the bird and comes to the princess's house where he lives a happy life with his second wife until he suddenly remembers his father and sets out on a quest for him.

It is not only the reader but also the hero himself who forgets the Skymaiden in this profusion of incidents that continues to get even more difficult to follow. When at last the hero remembers his wife, he burns a tuft of her hair and mumbles her name. She feels the call and comes down to live with him in the country where the son is crowned king.

ALIBASAH 1994 differs from the other volumes in that all the tales deal with one single animal—the mouse-deer. As is said in the Introduction, a mouse-deer is neither a deer nor a mouse but looks like an elegant combination of the two, as the excellent illustrations show. It is not bigger than a rabbit, and it is just as quick as a rabbit. To people of the northern part of Europe and Asia who are used to seeing the fox as the sly and cunning animal, it is surprising to find that this harmless little creature has the role of a trickster in South and Southeast Asia. Perhaps it is, as the Introduction says, that the small deer has to be cunning in a jungle with lions, tigers, elephants, and crocodiles. All these animals are also cheated by the mouse-deer in this volume.

It is amusing to see that the mouse-deer uses the same ruse to lure an elephant down into a pit as the Kammu trickster Plaang Thooy² does with a tiger. They just shout aloud that the sky is falling down and will press them flat if they do not jump down into the pit. If anyone undertakes the big job of comparing tricksters in different parts of the world, the mouse-deer tales should definitely be included.

As I have said already, the two series are a source of inspiration to foreign readers. Let us hope that they will also inspire Indonesian researchers to republish the tales in commented editions and—even more important!—to collect and preserve all the tales they can find before they vanish forever.

NOTES

1. This book was published in Manila in 1991.

2. See Lindell, Kristina, Jan-Ojvind Swahn, and Damrong Tayanin's *A Kammu Story-Listener's Tales*, p. 44, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series No. 33,

Curzon Press (1977). Plaang Thooy is called Aay Caang Laak in this text. See also Lindell, Kristina, Jan-Ojvind Swahn, and Damrong Tayanin's *Folk Tales from Kammu IV: A Master-Teller's Tales* (Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series No. 56, Curzon Press, 1989) in which Plaang Thooy is called Púu Ràngklà.