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Fertility, Myth, and Ritual in Northeast Java

Abstract

An analysis of a number of myths handed down in oral and written versions in villages near Tuban (on the north coast of Java) demonstrates that the mythical body is conceived of as a coherent whole. The first phase of the sequence is related to a series of sacred graves where offerings may be made for the benefit of individuals. The second phase is reenacted throughout the area during the yearly rituals of the rice cycle and the human life cycle. The two levels of the community (common villagers and the landholder/leader elite), having access to different versions of the myths, each explain them in their own way. Over time the myths and rituals have been adapted to accord with new concepts and circumstances. On a further level of stratification, a brief comparison with the court-related rice myths from Central Java and the corresponding rituals—which have been subject to similar adjustments—clearly shows the sociopolitical contrast between the feudal court and the village setting.

Keywords: fertility myths—ritual cycles—goddess—Pasisir culture—court rituals

JAVANESE RICE MYTHS have been the subject of extensive descriptive and analytical studies from the time of the early ethnographers until the present (see WINTER 1843; VAN DER WEIJDEN 1981). For a region as geographically and culturally diverse as Java the uniformity of the body of published rice myths is remarkable, despite MAYER's reference to "many different, more or less similar versions" of these myths (1897, 26). This lack of variety does not seem in keeping with an otherwise acknowledged cultural diversity (HATLEY 1983). Although manuscripts containing myths from the northeast coast or Pasisir are listed in PIGEAUD's *Literature of Java* (1967–70), most published myths originate in Central Java. Myths from Pasisir villages in particular seem underrepresented.

Various reasons may be suggested for this oversight. During the mid-nineteenth century a contrived antithesis developed between the feudal Central Javanese courts and the cosmopolitan Islamic Pasisir, which was expressed in hierarchical terms of *halus* (refined) and *kasar* (uncivilized). Educated Javanese (and Dutch scholars for that matter) came to consider the courts as the heartland of genuine Javanese culture (PIGEAUD 1967–70, 1:8). Central Javanese "idiom," verbal as well as nonverbal, has since been presented as the exemplary norm, thereby mistakenly implying an historical precedence as well. The same ahistorical model was imposed upon the relationship between court or elite culture and village culture. These views determined research choices until a few decades ago, so that ethnographic or anthropological research has barely considered north-coast Javanese village culture. Recent interest in Pasisir culture has primarily been concerned with the socioeconomic history and culture of the urban trading population (see LOMBARD 1990).

In the following article a more varied picture will be presented. A number of myths concerned with human and agricultural fertility, which were collected over a period of twenty years in villages near Tuban on the northeast coast of Java, will serve as the basis for a renewed analysis. Although

some of the myths found in the Tuban area were part of the earlier approaches, they were invariably treated as separate tales (HIDDING 1929; RASSERS 1982). The additional materials enable the moulding of the mythical body into a single sequential whole. The composite myth is shown to be related to spatial and temporal concepts and to the ritual cycle of the research area. Finally, a comparison with the Central Javanese myth of the origin of rice eloquently demonstrates the ideological differences between the East Javanese villages and the Central Javanese courts.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF KEREK

The subdistrict of Kerek, approximately twenty-five kilometers inland to the southwest of the ancient port town of Tuban, is an isolated pocket, enclosed to the north and the south by the foothills of the Pegunungan Kapur. Of little economic interest to the outside world, the area was largely left to its own devices until the mid-1970s, enabling the population to stick to its traditional way of life. At the time few outsiders had ventured into the area. Tales of the inhabitants' "aggression" and magic powers were common as far away as Surabaya, a four hours' drive to the east. Nineteenth-century colonial reports repeatedly mention disturbances caused by local *jago* (literally, "gamecocks"), and villages along the single entry road are described as robbers' dens that even officials of the Dutch Colonial Government were loath to pass. The villagers themselves, while recalling the reputedly rich spoils obtained from encounters with outsiders, stress the need for clear distinctions between the rights of insiders and outsiders. Tales of spells resulting in illness and even death are proudly recounted as the local manner to prevent or counteract intrusion.

Inside the area a similar need of each social and residential group for a distinctive position finds expression in a symbolical map that ascribes particular characteristics and tasks to each of eight village clusters located in the cardinal directions around a leading central cluster.¹ The spatial cycle starts in the east, moving through the southeast and the south towards the west and ending in the north, following the path of the sun. The stages of day and night, further related to the phases of life, add a temporal continuum. Thus the categorical age groups that make up the territorial "family" together reenact the yearly agricultural and ritual cycles.² Men and women each have their own status. The status of men is roughly determined by the ownership of land, with rice land rating highest on the scale. Land is inherited from father to son. Large landholders, including the leaders of the village, show strong patrilineal tendencies and aim at a virilocal residential pattern. The rest of the population lives in matrilocal compounds, where the main house is owned by the most senior woman and inherited from mother to daughter.

A mixed system of agriculture has long been the main source of sustenance, alternated and supplemented by a range of other activities. Possibilities for the cultivation of rice are limited by the porous limestone soils and lack of water. Most of the fields are dependent upon rainfall, and irrigation is possible only in the higher areas in the north and south. At present most of the crop is of the modern low-growing and pest-resistant variety advocated by the Indonesian government since the late 1960s. However, in disregard of the official rules, a small square in the middle of the field remains reserved for the traditional “long-necked” *paré menjeng* variety, said to be the personification of the rice goddess who protects the crop. This spot is the focus of the first harvest rituals.³ Rice is grown in all villages, but the cultivation of each of the additional ritual crops (cotton, chilies, lontar trees) is limited to a particular location. Not surprisingly, rice serves in this area primarily as a ritual food. The main staple is maize, supplemented by tuber crops. Only the local elite—landholders and village leaders—mix a spoonful of rice with the daily fare of pounded and steamed maize.

The ritual cycle is divided into two strongly contrasting phases that accord with climactic changes. The rainy season, a period of harmonious cooperation among members of the same family group, alternates with the dry season, a period of contacts with “outsiders,” which often leads to a strong potlatch-like competition. Similar oppositions between “cool” and “hot” periods are known from areas in northern and eastern Indonesia (VAN DIJK and DE JOSSELIN DE JONG 1990, 18–20; GEIRNAERT-MARTIN 1992, 274–75; PAUWELS 1990, 25; PLATENKAMP 1988). The harmonious phase, approximately between October and March, unites the villagers in a single purpose, the tillage of the fields and the sowing and nurturing of the new rice crop.⁴ During the following months each family group working the land together is turned in upon itself. Until a few decades ago much of this period would be spent in the field huts, leaving the villages to those who were too old or too young to contribute their share. Today, harmonious cooperation among landholding families and co-villagers involved in working their land is still emphasized, and much care is taken to bring the communal effort to its positive conclusion, an abundant harvest.

The rice harvest, between March and May, marks the end of this period of harmony. With the cutting of the rice stalks and their storing in the rice barn, the violent phase is initiated. The first rituals expressing confrontation are the food offerings (*manganan*) at the ancestral graves (figure 2). The following period is set aside for life-cycle and exchange rituals, which in the area are considered hazardous meetings with outsiders, reminiscent of the earlier strained contacts described above. Originally taking place during the third *mangsa* (the third period of the Javanese agricultural year, mid-August

to mid-September), these activities now only come to a stop during the planting season and the Islamic fasting month, Ramadhan.

In the myths, the relationship between insiders and outsiders and the latter's role in the continuity of the village community form a pervasive ingredient. The tales related to the origins of the fertility of humans and rice come first, while the stories connected to the continuation of human and plant life are second. The third and last group comprises tales related to harvest and regeneration.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF MYTHS

The villagers distinguish two types of stories among their body of tales. First, and most important to them, are the *dongeng wong biyen*—literally, “stories inherited from the people of old,” that is, the ancestors. The tales are closely connected to various sacred locations and/or ritual events. In this first category the villagers explicitly include *lelakon*, narratives of events, which belong to the repertoire of the ceremonial *wayang* (shadow puppet) performances, particularly those related to the agricultural cycle (RASSERS 1982, 19). The whole community is familiar with this first category, but its official transmission is restricted. The men and women whose task it is to recite the tales at the appropriate time and place using the proper phrases insist upon the stories' oral character. It is stressed that the stories' powerful impact would decrease if written down verbatim, thereby becoming available to anybody at any time.

The second category mentioned by the villagers consists of tales referred to as *kethoprak* or *sejarah*, described as historical tales that are understood to form part of a written tradition. However, the Javanese term *sejarah* also translates as “pedigree,” thereby implying a genealogical aspect (RAS 1987, xxii). This second category mostly appears to be the heritage of the village elite, although they may never have seen it in written form. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two types appears to be quite fluid. Several instances of *dongeng* incorporated in or adapted into *kethoprak* stories will be recounted.

A comparable distinction, albeit one not explicitly denoted as an autochthonous Javanese concept, is made by PIGEAUD, who lists two types of compendiums of stories, both called *Serat Kandha*. The first, referred to as “Universal Histories” (1967–70, 1:140), contains tales dating from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries and forms part of a tradition initiated in, among other places, the Central Pasisir kingdom of Demak. Following their adoption by the Central Javanese inland courts, they were continuously updated to incorporate changing political situations and concepts. In these compilations all known historical and mythical materials

have been combined to form a single framework (PIGEAUD 1967, 1:139). The villagers' *kethoprak* stories can be ascribed to this category. Pigeaud's second type of compilation is referred to as "Books of Tales," whose geographical origin is loosely specified as Pasisir. The contents are limited to mythical materials that "may be related to the oral traditions of professional storytellers and *wayang* performers" (PIGEAUD 1967-70, 1:142). The stories glossed by the villagers as *dongeng wong biyen* appear to fit into this category.⁵

EAST JAVA—THE STRANGER AND THE RICE GODDESS

The first group of myths encountered in the area belongs to the *dongeng wong biyen*. A number of different localized versions are known throughout Kerek as well as in the neighboring subdistricts. Each of these localized versions is related to a sacred grave or spot in a particular village,⁶ and each honors one among a group of strangers who were killed on that particular spot. The group consisted of a beautiful bride, her caretakers, and her followers, who, loaded with riches, had journeyed through the area on the way to the bridegroom's house. Although the general gist of the myth is known to most villagers in the area, only the person taking care of a grave is entitled to relate the accompanying section of the tale in full detail. He or she generally claims descent from the victim. Some of the stories include specific prohibitions connected with the grave, which may also provide clues to the symbolic meaning of the tale. The myth told in the central village runs as follows.

Long ago a beautiful young stranger, Lanjar Maipit, was journeying through the area on her way to meet her groom, accompanied (*diiring*) by a first cousin (*misanan*) named Menak Rogawe,⁷ her personal servant, and many followers carrying her riches (*harta*). Suddenly a group of local men, overwhelmed by the beauty of the young bride and attracted by the riches in her possession, engaged the travellers in a fight (*kroyokan* or *rebutan*). Menak Rogawe, having come to the bride's defense, expected her to surrender to him, but she refused.⁸ He was then set upon by the villagers with their hoes (*dibacuk*) and sickles (*disuduk*), but to no avail. Finally, when all other efforts failed, he was pounded to death (*dikepuk*) in the rice block (*lesung*). In the meantime, Maipit and the rest of her following managed to continue their journey.

The reputed grave of the male protagonist in this version of the myth is located under a large tamarind tree, next to a small well in the middle of a residential area. Its caretaker is the erstwhile village clerk (*carik*), who claims to be a descendant. Although at first reluctant to recite the tale, he used much of the proper wording in his rendering. He incorporated a less expres-

sive version, acknowledged as the settlement myth of the village, in the official village report (*laporan desa*).

The grave is considered magically powerful, but also dangerous to certain people. In 1990 a recently married young man, having inadvertently fallen asleep under the tree, dreamt of being threatened by an enormous male figure rising out of the grave. As a result he tried to commit suicide and lost his mind for three days. He recovered only after his mother brought food offerings to the village sacred spot (*pundhen*). Menak Rogawe's spirit was no match to the protective power of Buyut 'Ringin, the benevolent village ancestress (*danyang*), resting under an ancient sacred banyan tree (see WESSING 1995 [197] regarding *danyang*).⁹

The graves in the eastern and southeastern villages are both related to the next installment of the tale, the ravishing and the death of the bride. The local versions of the myth have become extremely complex over time, embellished (or rather disguised) by a bewildering accumulation of details. Interestingly, changes in the drift of the tale from the eastern village appear to have occurred between 1989 and 1996. This may be due to recent modernizing efforts by the village chief, who is not in any way "related" to the grave but who obviously felt that the bloody tale needed expurgation. At his orders the grave has been "rehabilitated" (*direhab*), and its occupant, earlier referred to as Randha Kuning,¹⁰ has been unified with Jumilah, the female founder of the village. This Muslim *danyang* is further reputed to have arrived from Temayang, in accordance with the eastern village's claim to be a "child" of this southeastern village. Older villagers, however, still honor the grave under its original name.

In the southeast, another—again arbitrary—effort at modification has been made by the present village head, who added a series of historical details to the tale. Proudly mentioning his Mataram ancestry and his law degree, he stated that such tales should be related replete with historical dates and should also mention the names of persons and places involved.¹¹ The new version of the tale presents an interesting example of the manner in which *dongeng wong biyen* may be altered into historical tales (*kethoprak* or *sejarah*). Unacceptable details have once more been expurgated. The officially acknowledged tale, published by the local representative of the department of culture, now runs as follows.

In the early seventeenth century [sic] a bloody encounter took place between a local band of bandits under the leadership of one Suronadi and a group accompanying two [sic] brides from the village of Maibit [sic] in Rengel—a district to the east—and their groom, a prince from Mataram [sic]. In the confusion of the fight, the brides' two [sic] ser-

vants found themselves separated from the main group and decided to settle near the village of Temayang, a name said to derive from *tempat manten ilang*, “the place where the bridal couple disappeared.” The main figures somehow managed to escape safely to Mataram [sic], and their defenders, reluctant to return home without their charges, decided to settle in the area. Their village’s name, Jaro, is said to be short for *lanjar loro*, “the two young widows.” There they also erected a small mosque.

Another, more original, tale attributes the *langgar* (prayerhouse) to a group of men who had been felling trees in the nearby forest to build the famous mosque of Demak. Spending the night near the local *pundhen*, the resting place of a certain Mbah Dewi (Grandmother Goddess), they felt so much at home that they decided to use the timber intended for the mosque of Demak to build a mosque right there, in the middle of the forest. The chewy young sprouts that formed their sustenance gave the place its name, *semigit*.¹²

Although the theme and the name of the ravished bride have been effectively removed from the official version of the myth, Jaro and Temayang, the two southeastern villages, each have a grave closely related to elements from the original tale. The first grave, said to contain Maipit’s servant Embah Babu, is found in the middle of the fields among the remnants of what used to be a forested area on the boundary of the two villages. The old retainer’s healing powers are regularly invoked by supplicants from all over the area. The main grave is located in Jaro, off a central road connecting several villages. The present-day term of address for this sacred grave is Embah Semigit, explained as an abbreviation of *Embah semi digigit* (grandmother young sprout chewed upon). The term *embah* is often used as an honorific for venerable spots or objects. The young sprout chewed on would then refer to the young woman killed (or consumed?) on this spot.

The reference to a “chewed-upon young sprout” in the last tale intimates a relation between this phase of the myth and the next, in which eating takes on a special meaning. It may further be noted that young sprouts are the essence of the food offering for the ritual at the very beginning of the agricultural season (*wiwitan*), performed just before the land is to be plowed. The fenced-off sacred area around the grave is entered through two arched gateways decorated with a snake and a dove, symbols of earth and sky. The grave itself is shaded by huge trees and sheltered by a closed tiered building partially made of brick, which resembles a small Islamic prayerhouse. A clear example of a pre-Islamic sacred place disguised by Muslim elements, the building contains a low seat of honor (*dampar*), a large water vat (*genthong*), a Chinese vat for keeping rice (*guci*), a large mosque drum

(*bedhug*), and the unlucky bride's resting place (*dipan*).

Her presence is keenly felt. The ancient female caretaker, although adamantly refusing to relate the myth, did impart the stringent rules that had been laid down by the luckless bride herself. Following the most important of those restrictions, newly married young couples, even at the cost of making a detour, must avoid passing beside the grave for six weeks after their wedding in order to avoid any untoward effects the failed bride might have upon their future happiness (this injunction will be explored below, and in connection with the disastrous effect of Menak Rogawe's grave upon the young villager mentioned above). A second restriction concerns requests for good health and prosperity, for which people come from all over the area. The time designated for the presentation of food offerings is seven o'clock in the morning, a time related to the following tale.

Early in the morning a group of village men busy preparing a field hut for a celebration were distracted by the passing of a beautiful bride and fell upon her [although, once more, this is not explicitly mentioned]. As a result the field hut sagged; this lopsided field hut (*gubug peceng*) can still be seen in the sky as the Southern Cross (*lintang gubug peceng*).

An elderly villager suggested that the occasion for which the field hut was being decorated may have been the harvest. In some areas the Southern Cross is indeed called *lumbung*, "rice shed" (MAASS 1924, 166). The sagging of the structure then refers to a failed harvest or, by implication, to the killing of the passing bride. The prescribed time for sending food, seven in the morning, is also the time of day when women in the area must send the first meal (*ngirim*) to their menfolk working on the field.

The link between a young stranger at the height of fertility (male or female) and rice (that is, human and agricultural regeneration) gradually emerges from these tales. The image becomes obvious in another tale, a transformation of the Maipit story. The protagonist of the myth is now a divine outsider referred to as Mbok Sri Ayu, a respectful term of address for the rice goddess.¹³ Quite clearly this part of the tale is a rice myth. People throughout the region are familiar with the story, as it is not linked to any particular grave site but to the graves of all ancestors. The main difference with the previous tales is that, rather than being taken by force, the contested woman offers a pact and voluntarily submits to her assailants, with the words "*Emboh mangana karo areke nek mangsa ketelu*" (All right, eat me then, together with my child, when the third season [has come]). Although offering herself and her child, she lays down clear restrictions as to the period when they may be consumed.

Indeed, during the third or dry season of the year (*mangsa ketelu*), the command is enacted throughout the area. The first key to the injunction lies in the hidden meaning of the term *mangan*. In Javanese it generally signifies “to eat,” but in East Javanese slang the term also stands for (sexual) consummation in the case of women. Two different rituals can be connected to the ritual eating of Mbok Sri Ayu (i.e., rice). The first is the *manganan*, the yearly ritual food offering at the graves.¹⁴ The second comprises the ceremonial food exchanges in the village, which form part of the life-cycle rituals.

The main contribution to the *manganan*, offered by the village head’s wife, consists of a *dhondhang*, a rectangular wooden container filled with a layer of steamed rice, a hand of bananas, and a variety of *panganan* (sweet cookies mostly made from rice). Two retainers carry this personification of Mbok Sri Ayu to the graveyard (figure 1), where all the villagers are gathered. The women stand in the center, each of them having brought her own small version of the offering in the form of steamed rice, bananas, and dry rice crackers. The men form a circle on the periphery. All women help the village-head’s wife redistribute the food offerings among the married men present. Young boys, who do not as yet have the right to “eat” must fight for their share, as in the first versions of the myth.

During the second ritual, the ceremonial food exchanges between the host family and the other participants of all life-cycle ceremonies, the food served is determined by instructions mentioned in Mbok Sri Ayu’s command. The meal offered to the guests at all life-cycle ceremonies consists of *sega stelan becek* (steamed rice complemented by a spicy meat soup). The main ingredient of the soup is beef from the village-head’s wife’s “child” (*areke*)—a head of cattle, which, according to yet another local tale, is born from a woman’s menstrual blood (SOLLEWIJN GELPKE 1874, 120).¹⁵ In both rituals the raw rice has been transformed into food. In the first instance, however, it is combined with (raw) fruit and dry cookies, while in the second it is well-done, spiced meat that forms the addition. Further details of this distinction will be considered below.

CENTRAL JAVA: THE RICE GODDESS

For comparative purposes I will briefly outline the Central Javanese rice myth, which has been the subject of extensive studies.¹⁶ It is encountered in several Javanese manuscripts, the most important of which is the *Manik Maya*; it also forms part of the body of tales of the *wayang* repertoire. Although the Central Javanese tale is similar to the Pasisir story insofar as it attributes the origin of rice to the dead body of a woman, important differences can be noted. The myth runs as follows.

Retna Jumilah, a beautiful maiden born of an egg from the ocean, is adopted by the main Javanese god, Batara Guru, and his wife, Uma. When the child matures into a beautiful young woman her father takes a fancy to her. She refuses to marry him unless he brings her “food that one never gets tired off, clothing that never wears out, and musical instruments that give sound without being played on” [SOLLEWIJN GELPKE 1874, 114; RASSERS 1982, 16]. Despite his failure to obtain these gifts, he imposes himself upon her and she dies. He orders that she be buried in the fields, and after forty days a variety of cultivated plants are found to have sprouted from her body: rice from her womb or navel, coconut from her head, etc. Batara Guru ordains that her name be Dewi Sri, Goddess of Rice.

In the early days of the Central Javanese realm of Mataram this myth found its ritual enactment in an annual offering of rice and the sacrifice of a buffalo; this was performed to ensure prosperity and welfare for the ruler and his subjects for the coming year (SOELARTO 1993, 9). After 1756 the ritual was spread over three different annual state rituals, known as the Garebeg, when the ruler made an appearance (*ginarebeg*) before his subjects. The rituals have now taken on strong Muslim overtones, as they are held on the birthday of the Prophet Muhamad (Garebeg Maulud), and on the two main Islamic holidays. The first of these holidays, Idul Ad’ha, falls in the month Besar and honors the return of the pilgrims from Mecca. The second, Idul Fitri, celebrates the end of the fasting month Ramadhan (SOELARTO 1993, 19; 41–49).

Vague echoes of the erstwhile thanksgiving offerings can be recognized among the rituals of the second of the Garebeg feasts, the so-called Garebeg Besar. Huge offerings, *gunungan*, in the form of mountains of steamed rice decorated with the raw fruits of the field, are blessed at the mosque by order of the ruler and distributed among his subjects. In practice all present throw themselves upon (*ngrebut*) the offerings to secure a small portion. The magic power emanating from the ruler’s offering, multiplied by the blessings at the mosque, are thought to ensure the recipients’ well-being for the coming year (SOELARTO 1993, 55–67). Separately from the food offerings, the sultan donates several water buffaloes to the mosque, to be slaughtered in accordance with Muslim rules, so that the raw meat can be divided among the needy (SOELARTO 1993, 49). Thus the three main elements of the village ritual—rice offerings, their procurement by force, and the division of meat—are still in existence in the court setting. However, rice and meat are not combined anymore, and the latter is left raw.

EAST JAVA: THE SKY NYMPH

In the second village tale, a young couple, Jaka Tarub and Nawang Wulan, figure as the main characters.¹⁷ Referred to by the villagers as a *kethoprak* story, it is indeed encountered in numerous early and recent written sources, among others in the official Central Javanese genealogical history, the *Babad Tanah Jawi* (OLTHOFF 1987, 25–27). Referred to there as a tale from Pajang, it essentially serves to link the Central Javanese rulers in an unbroken line to their East Javanese predecessors (RAS 1987, xxvi). Only the first part of the story in the *Babad* is encountered in the village; it is also found in recent compilations of *dongeng* or *cerita rakyat*, “folk stories.” A brief outline follows.

A young man, Jaka Tarub, having come upon a group of sky nymphs (*wid[y]adari*) bathing in a spring deep in the forest,¹⁸ hides the clothing of the most beautiful among them, Nawang Wulan. As this dress enables her to fly and return home, she is forced to remain and marry him. Her fertility is evident, as she bears him a daughter and also feeds the family from a single stalk of rice. However, against her wishes the husband curiously peeps into the rice steamer. The spell is broken and little by little the rice shed empties, until Nawang Wulan discovers her clothing hidden underneath. Realizing that their union is not to be, she leaves her unreliable husband and returns home to the abode of her father in the sky. Ever since that day, farmers have had to toil in their fields, growing the yearly supply of rice.

The villagers generally insist they are not able to relate this tale, explaining that they “don’t understand (*nggak ngerti*) *kethoprak*.” Only elderly members of the village elite will summarize the contents, invariably emphasizing their relation to the care of the new crop. Those who had traveled outside Kerek might mention a sacred spring in the wooded area south of Tuban, where the nymphs reputedly came to bathe once every thirty-five days, on the sacred day Anggara-Kasih.

Highlights from the story are nevertheless referred to by all villagers as well-known prescripts handed down by the rice goddess for the care (*momong*) of rice and child. These prescripts are laid down in village *dongeng* related to Mbok Sri, while the name Nawang Wulan is rarely mentioned. Thus, for instance, the villagers are all aware of the injunction not to leave any women’s clothing in the fields during the preharvest period in order not to frighten Mbok Sri away. For the same reason women insist on wearing men’s hats and shirts when weeding or protecting the young rice crop from the birds, while in the old days a woman’s blouse was hidden underneath the rice in storerooms. Finally, when the rice steamer is on the fire, men are

not allowed to open the lid to check whether the rice is done, so as not to make the rice disappear or, as they express it, “to drive Mbok Sri away.”

EAST JAVA: THE ROYAL CHILDREN

The third village tale is encountered in numerous written versions. The rendering in the Central Javanese *Serat Pustakaꦫaja Purwa* is best known (RANGGAWARSITA 1993, 3:36–88); a version in East Javanese Surabaya dialect is given by KATS (1916, 197–99). These two and various *wayang* scripts (KRUIJT 1903; RASSERS 1982) contain a bewildering wealth of detail. In essence, they concern the wanderings and trials of Princess Sri and Prince Sedono, children of His Majesty Mahapunggung. Although the pair is said to be intended for each other, they rarely end up united forever. Even if they manage to stay together for a while, in the end they are separated, often by supernatural means.

Many villagers are aware of particular details from the story and their connection to the harvest period, but ordinary folk are not willing to relate them. Only those personally involved in the harvest rituals are allowed to discuss the matter. One elder, who combines the functions of Islamic village official and agricultural ritual specialist, strikingly summarized the essence as follows.

Sri and Sedono long to “mingle” (*kepingin campur*). In East Javanese slang the second term also indicates sexual intercourse with mutual consent. The union will come to pass only if the villagers consistently care for the rice on their fields, following the prescripts originally laid down by Mbok Sri. As a result they will be rewarded by an abundant harvest of rice (*sri*) and obtain money (*[se]dana*), enabling them to properly contribute to the donations for the life-cycle rituals [figure 4].¹⁹

At weddings in the area each married female guest contributes uncooked rice (*beras*), while each married man donates a gift of money (*dhana/dana*). The family of the groom also donates several sacks of rice, a head of cattle, and spices. In return, each guest will be offered a portion of rice with meat soup and receive the same food wrapped together into one package, thus expressing the unity of the community. One week after the wedding, the groom’s family receives a wooden food carrier filled with steamed rice topped with a container filled with meat soup. This return gift, cooked and joined into the prescribed set of female and male elements, is considered proof of the marriage.

Despite these balanced exchanges, the period also shows strongly confrontative aspects. Much gambling and drinking of strong liquor go on

among the men, with the younger and the older generation playing cards for money at separate tables. Especially the men, hosts and guests alike, consider each ritual a huge gamble. It is a matter of pride for all involved to emulate each other in conspicuous consumption, and still come out with a profit (see also APRIONO 1992).

ANALYTICAL APPROACHES

VAN DER WEIJDEN, in her analysis of rice myths, classifies three main themes encountered throughout Indonesia (1981, 212–13). In the most common theme, rice—and other cultivated plants—are said to have sprouted from the dead body of a female ancestor or goddess. In the second theme, rice is a gift bestowed from either heaven or the underworld. In the third, the coveted food plant is stolen by human beings. Although the theme of the dead woman is indeed found in the tales of Mbok Sri Ayu and Dewi Sri, the egg from which Retna Jumilah/Dewi Sri was born came from the ocean. Since in Java the underworld and the ocean fall into the same category, the tales may be seen as representative of the second theme as well. While the rice in the Nawang Wulan story would seem to be a gift from heaven, the fact that it results from a human stealing a dress (and thus appropriating the owner of the rice) ties it in with the third theme as well. These examples make it clear that the symbolical meaning attributed by the Javanese villagers to the various elements of the myths described above include more complex classifications. Most important, Javanese symbolic expression is permeated with associative imagery and can only be understood in relation to a wide range of cultural concepts.

The next section will consider the conceptual basis of the stories' main elements and common themes as they are forged into a meaningful set by the villagers. Most obvious of these elements is the way in which more or less violent contacts with outsiders play a role in each of the tales, though the origin of the protagonists and the outcome are different in each case. While each of the myths is related to ritual sites and activities, the place, time, scope, and the desired effect will be shown to differ.

OUTSIDERS TRANSFORMED INTO BENEVOLENT FORCES: MAIPIT

The first stories relate a series of contacts with outsiders, all of which end in violence when a group of local men overpower the outsider. The murdered strangers are “planted” (*ditanem*[i]; a term that means not only “planted” but also “interred”) and henceforth their graves function as a benevolent force for the increased well-being of the community.²⁰ The sequence of the slayings and the location of the graves do not relinquish their symbolic meaning without reference to the conceptual distinctions referred to above. The

specific role of leadership attributed to the center, the phase of childhood to the east and the position of liminal point between childhood and marriage in the regenerative cycle of the area (see above; cf. HERINGA 1993, 164–66) can also be applied to the present case.

The position of the grave in the central, leading village designates it as that of the principal male outsider, who is transformed into an ancestor of the elite. Nevertheless, the local spirit, the female *danyang* of the village, is proven more powerful than the outsider. In comparison with the many myths of immigrant rulers known throughout Indonesia (cf. DE JOSSELIN DE JONG 1980; PLATENKAMP 1990), it is noteworthy that this foreigner is vanquished by the villagers and appropriated for their own needs. Thereby the tale presents the proud insiders' view of an autonomous group also shown by the rest of the tales. Notwithstanding these feelings of pride, young men of the central village, who have just entered their own fertile phase, should be cautious of the disrupted and therefore still unsocialized fertility emanating from the grave.

Once the principal protector of the female outsider is removed, this opens the way for the killing of her last helper, her servant, and eventually herself, appropriately in the southeast. Conceptually this is the neutral point, between childhood and maturity, neither paired nor unpaired. As the victimized bride has not been able to channel her own fertility, her grave emanates a potent but unsocialized fertilizing force for the whole area. This disorderly influence is deemed dangerous to those on the threshold of maturity themselves, young couples who have not reached the full status of being parents and full members of the community. To those who have undergone the proper life-cycle rituals, the powerful magic emanating from the grave is beneficial.

The role of the grave in the eastern village is not as easily clarified. According to its position in the cycle, one would expect it to be that of the child, related to the beginning of life. Children do indeed play a role, as the name of the person interred is given as Randha Kuning: a *randha* is a widow or divorced woman *with children*. Furthermore, the eastern village designates itself as the "child" of the southeastern village, thus indicating that the eastern grave may be regarded as a child as well. It may also be pointed out that *kuning* (yellow) denotes the early or "child's" phase of the ripening rice crop on the field. Nevertheless, a clear explanation cannot as yet be offered on the basis of this information.

Up to this point, the tales all relate to a particular sacred grave of a human victim (male or female), with the graves being guarded by a person professing to be a descendant of that victim. The spot may benefit individuals at a particular time of the day, throughout the year; negative effects obtain

for those in the same position as the victim. The next tale is related to every ancestor's grave throughout the area. Its impact is thereby raised to a different and more extensive level, which also finds expression in the more elevated status of its protagonist.

A SOCIAL PACT: MBOK SRI AYU

Here, the young woman is the goddess of rice, an outsider from the cosmic realm, who voluntarily allows herself to be "eaten," thereby initiating a pact with her aggressors and transforming the violence into a relationship that offers the possibility of procreation or regeneration. Her active role is in accordance with the practice in Kerek, where young girls take the initiative in marriage by choosing their own partners. The yearly communal enactment of the offering takes place on the graves of the ancestors in the period preceding the phase of life-cycle rituals, and—incidentally—the start of a new agricultural cycle (figure 1). In the presence of the living and the dead, a beginning is made with the partial reinstatement of regeneration. This can be deduced from the fact that the food offering is made up of raw and cooked ingredients, midway between disorder and socialization. Similarly, not all social groups have the same rights. Like their ancestors before them, the married men partake of the redistributed offerings of the women; only the young boys must secure a portion for themselves by force (figure 2). Their turn comes in the following phase.

INITIATION RITUALS: SKY NYMPHS

This phase again refers to a woman from an outer realm, the sky nymph Nawang Wulan, who, instead of being killed, is tricked into marriage. The husband, whose name is Jaka Tarub, is described as the adopted son of the widow of the head of the village (RASSERS 1982, 265), and thus obviously belongs to the landholder class. In accordance with the local custom among the elite landholders in Kerek, the woman marries into her husband's house. She bears him a daughter and freely offers him rice, but she departs when she learns of her husband's deceit. She nevertheless provides him with pre-cripts for the care of their child and the cultivation of rice. She thus can be said to function as an initiator.

Although the villagers stress the agricultural role of the sky nymph in her personification of the rice goddess Mbok Sri, they also explicitly compare sky nymphs (*widyadari*) to the *sindir*, the hired female performers of dance and erotic songs (figure 3). They descend upon the village for a particular ritual occasion: the circumcision of the present-day Jaka Tarub, son of the village elite. Comparable to an initiation, the ritual is explicitly said to prepare the young boy for marriage.²¹ For the first time in his life, under the



FIGURE 1

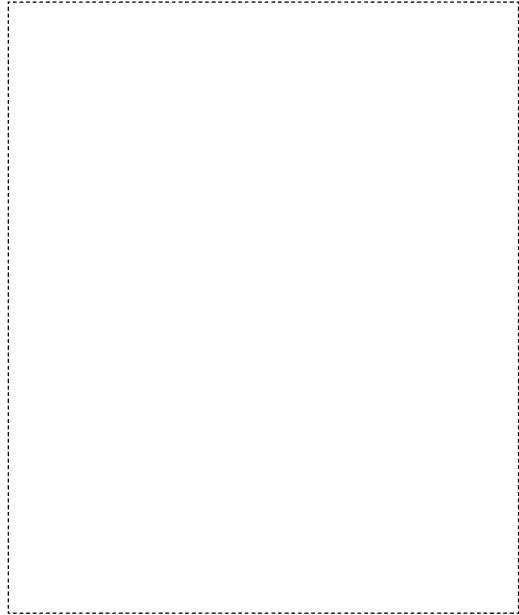


FIGURE 2

FIGURE 1. *Manganan*, food offerings on the ancestral graves to married men from all levels of the community; these men are entitled to a voluntary gift of rice brought and divided by the wives, personifications of Mbok Sri Ayu, the rice goddess.

FIGURE 2. *Manganan*, reenactment on the ancestral graves of the rape of Mak Ipit, the beautiful outsider bride, by the young boys, who, not yet having gained full membership in the community, must fight for their share (*kroyok*).

FIGURE 3. Initiation ritual. Recently circumcised, a boy from the elite, the present-day Jaka Tarub, is allowed for the first time to dance with the *sindir*, the personification of the sky nymph Nawang Wulan, under the tutelage of his mother's brother.

FIGURE 4. Wedding ceremony. In their role of Sri and Sedhana, a young couple is united by the Islamic official.

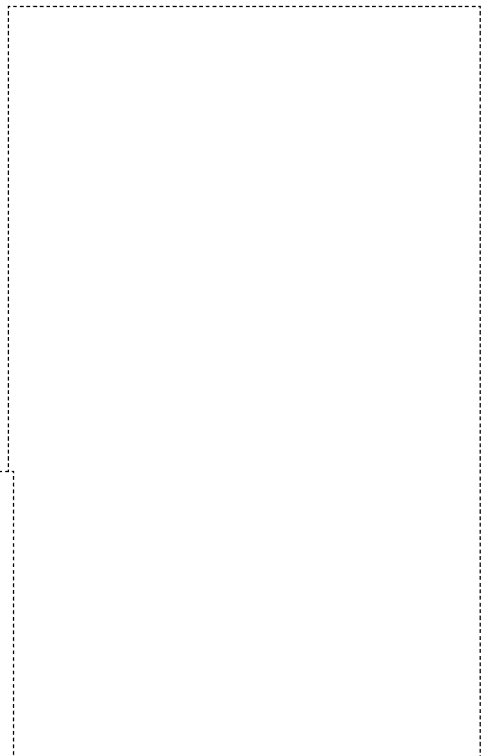


FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4

tutelage of his mother's brother, he is allowed to dance with the alluring women. Contrary to previous ritual occasions, this then is the first time the young boy is given special rights. He is the one to formally open the ceremonial dance, while the grown men must wait their turn. Later they must pay in cash and compete for the dancers' attentions. This transaction can be explained as the exchange of a gift of money (*dhana/dana*) for a share of fertility, and also as the formalized reenactment of the *kroyokan*, the free-for-all ravishing of Maipit.

UNITY: SRI SEDONO

The final phase in the series concerns the union of Sri and Sedono, which can only come to pass after many trials, or after Sri and Sedono are both initiated (see RASSERS 1982, 21). It is, moreover, the only contact forged not with outsiders but with close kin. This supposedly incestuous character of the relationship has been suggested as the reason the two protagonists have such difficulty in marrying (RASSERS 1982, 22). In an East Javanese version of the myth the two are merely described as children of the same father (KATS 1916, 197), while in the Central Javanese version Sedono is further referred to as Sri's younger brother (*rayi*) (RANGGAWARSITA 1993, 3:36).²² It is noteworthy that among the landholding village elite of Kerek ideal marriage partners are those with the closest possible kin ties, such as full (maternal) cousins (*sepupu* or *sedulur*, terms that also stand for siblings).²³ More important seems to be the information that the two are of royal descent. Indeed, during wedding rituals throughout Indonesia, bride and groom are designated *raja sehari*, king [and queen] for the day (figure 4). The second part of this term, *sehari*, also provides an explanation for the short duration of the union. The pair is fated to "mingle" for a short, preordained time and then must move apart once more. In Java sexual imagery in particular is deemed too powerful for constant use (HERINGA 1991, 57). The time when insiders fuse with outsiders and renewed fertility occurs is considered extremely hot (see VAN DIJK and DE JOSSELIN DE JONG 1990 [19] for similar ideas in Eastern Indonesia). It should only come to the fore at designated times and places.

Recent changes are, however, at variance with these rules. The pinnacle of the agricultural cycle (the rice marriage [*manten pare*] enacted in the fields at the beginning of the harvest) and the high point in the life cycle (the human marriages [*manten*] celebrated in the villages) used to occur every year at the same time throughout the area. The harvest falls at the end of the rainy season, thereby ending the cool or harmonious period, while the life-cycle rituals were traditionally restricted to the dry months and functioned as the essence of the hot and confrontative period. At present, however, the

period for marriages extends far beyond the original three or four months of the dry season. This is due to the unlimited availability of rice on the market throughout the year; in the old system the supply was mostly dependent upon the yield from the local fields. A huge layout of money is now needed for the exchanges. Besides suffering from the heavy burden of expenses, the villagers express concern about the ritual imbalance between the harmonious and confrontative phases of the cycle. It is feared, and explicitly suggested, that the area will become overheated.

The timing of the food offerings at the graves underwent a change at an earlier date due to the influence of Islam. Originally they were held in the month of Apit, the eleventh month of the Islamic lunar calendar and a period of abstinence and repentance between the old and the new agricultural cycles. As such the food offerings are said to have served as a mediatory ritual to end the confrontation and initiate harmony. At present, depending upon the strictness of the Moslem leanings of the village head concerned, they are often organized in the twelfth month. Similar to the Central Javanese timing, this is the Moslem offering month Besar. The offerings at the graves thus interfere with the life-cycle season, giving traditional-minded villagers another cause for concern.

Summarizing the argument, it can be concluded that the symbolic meaning of the myths differs depending upon each person's status group. The common people are mostly concerned with the *dongeng*, which stress the role of Mbok Sri, Mother Rice, and her instructions for the agricultural cycle. The landholders, who have access to the *dongeng* and also to the more elaborate *kethoprak* stories, relate the contents to the different phases in a man's life, his gradual socialization, and his changing relations with women. To the patrifocal landholders, of primary importance is the gradual incorporation of a female outsider into their home, in order to perpetuate their lineage. Ideally, the role of the young man's mother's brother as initiator will also be that of his father-in-law. Notwithstanding this difference, all villagers view their myths as a coherent whole, conceptually related to the yearly ritual cycle of regeneration of rice and human relationships.

A comparison of the Central Javanese myth with those from East Java clearly shows a contrast on a further stratificatory level. In the court setting, the ruler commits incest by trying to possess his (adopted) daughter. As the sole owner of the land, he automatically becomes the owner of the rice sprouting from her interred body. The reaction of the villagers to the Dewi Sri myth, which they had never heard but immediately recognized as related to their Mbok Sri Ayu tale, was one of derision and unbelief. The villagers maintained that the ownership of the rice by a single man and the donation of a mere part of the crop to the ruler's subjects was unfair. They insisted

upon a pact in which all men have the same rights. Further comparison shows that, in the village version, the man is a landholder, while the woman has her origin in the sky or upper world. In the court account, the man is the ruler, King of the Mountain (Girinata), while the woman, his adopted daughter, is born from the ocean or underworld.²⁴ The tales are in fact each other's inversal and clearly delineate the sociopolitical differences between the two settings.

NOTES

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1. In other areas in Java such structural systems are known as *moncapat* (see VAN OSSENBRUGGEN 1977). In Kerek this term is not used.

2. Elsewhere I have elaborated on this symbolic system (HERINGA 1993, 157) and its relation to the women's main additional activity, the manufacture of textiles, and agriculture (HERINGA 1993, 1994).

3. See also Beatriz van der Goes's contribution in this volume. At present this tradition is continued only on the communal fields, *tanah bengkong*, cultivated by the village heads.

4. Priority will be given to the cultivation of rice, although the preceding phase, the cultivation of maize on dry fields, forms part of the agricultural cycle.

5. This second category probably dates to a much earlier period than the first. The implicit ahistorical sequence is in accordance with the views reigning at the time when Pigeaud's invaluable reference work was compiled.

6. Only the graves found in the Kerek subdistrict will be described here, as it would be beyond the scope of this article to describe every grave related to this tale that was pointed out to me. Suffice it to say that systems resembling the one described are found in neighboring areas.

7. *Lanjar*: "young childless widow." An alternate spelling for *Maipit* might possibly be *Maḵ Ipet*, "tiny mother." *Ipet* also refers to the small hairs on an ear of rice (JANSZ 1913, 258). The translation of "Menak Rogawe" is unclear. The term *gawe* denotes (ritual) work, possibly indicating the gentleman's (*menak*) role as guardian of the bride.

8. Among commoners *misanan*, first cousins, are forbidden to marry. Only owners of extensive tracts of land will go against these rules, ostensibly to keep the land together.

9. Buyut 'Ringin: "Great grandmother [under the] banyan tree" *Buyut* (great grandparent) and (*e*)*mbah* (grandparent) are honorific terms of address also used for places and objects.

10. Randha Kuning: "The yellow widow with children."

11. I have been unable to ascertain a source for the dates.

12. The folk-etymological version of *semigit* is given by the villagers as *semi digigit*, "young sprouts chewed on."

13. Mbok Sri Ayu: "Mother beautiful Rice Goddess."

14. In other areas, particularly in village Central Java, this ritual is referred to as *bersih desa*, the cleaning or purifying of the village (see also PEMBERTON 1994, ch. 6; RASSERS 1982,

7–10). Most of the reports conclude that it is a thanksgiving ritual for the harvest. The *rebutan* scene is at present not enacted as part of the ritual, but separately and furtively (PEMBERTON 1994, 244).

15. The villagers could not clarify whether this “child” is male or female.

16. See VAN DER WEIJDEN 1981 (35–39) for a detailed survey.

17. Nawang Wulan: “Resemblance [of the] Moon.” Jaka Tarub: “(unmarried) young man of the circumcision shed,” or, “one soon to be initiated or circumcised.”

18. See HAZEU 1901 for the distinction between the Indian *apsari* and the Indonesian *widadari*.

19. According to PIGEAUD (1982, 59) the word *dana* refers to a voluntary gift or donation. Old Javanese *dhana* (from Sanskrit) stands for wealth, riches, or money (ZOEITMULDER 1982, 1:358). Interestingly, the ritual specialist directly connected the two meanings in his explanation.

20. These tales might be considered a Javanese echo of headhunting practices. While a similar relation has been proposed for myths from several eastern and northern Indonesian areas (VAN DER WEIJDEN 1981, 229, citing Jensen), the hypothesis would indicate that remnants of phenomena generally thought to be typical of tribal cultures may well be encountered in some parts of western, Indianized Indonesia. It is, however, beyond the scope of the present article to consider such further ramifications.

21. *Wid(y)adari* also descend to the house of the bride on the *widodaren*, the evening before a Central Javanese wedding.

22. A marriage between Sri and Sedono, her younger brother (or cousin), would be further hindered by the fact that Javanese marriage rules say the groom must be genealogically older or descended from an older lineage than his bride.

23. The term (*se*)*dulur* (sibling or cousin) was not encountered in the few Javanese texts of the myth I have checked. Further research may offer clearer insights.

24. The palace of the mythical spouse of the Ruler, Nyi Lara Kidul, the Goddess of the South, is also located in the ocean.

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