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REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND POLITICAL ORDER IN INDONESIAN STORYTELLING

JOHANN ANGERLER

Independent Researcher associated with the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies

Traditional Indonesian storytelling is more than entertainment. Frequently stories convey religious content and sometimes contain information relevant to an understanding of the political order. Explaining the spiritual and political order of the world can be regarded as one of the main functions of storytelling in general. In my paper, I want to restrict myself to exploring the politically legitimizing relationship with wild nature (jungle, mountain tops, sea, rivers, lakes) found in (West) Indonesian narratives. This relationship to nature can be described both positively and negatively in the stories. More egalitarian-oriented, traditional (or tribal) Indonesian societies tend to describe their relationship with wild nature and its spiritual representatives as positive, albeit dangerous. A ritually well-established and well-maintained relationship with the spiritual representatives of wild nature helps to legitimize some hierarchical structures in an egalitarian society, often needed to achieve cooperative goals, and also helps to keep the same hierarchical structures in check, limiting their authority to their original task. Stories associated with this relationship can function as unofficial constitutions of the political order in such societies. In the past, dynastic societies (kingdoms) have sometimes produced stories in which political legitimacy is derived from subjugating the representatives of wild nature, frequently described as wild beasts or monsters. Compared to the first category, stories of this type seem to have an inverse function: they remove the spiritual necessity to enter into a positive relationship with wild nature and legitimize the supreme power of the king. Nevertheless, stories about a positive relationship with the spiritual representatives of wild nature as a legitimizing institution for political positions seem deeply rooted in Austronesian tradition and some of them have survived in both types of societies and even have some relevance in the context of modern politics.



Johann Angerler (PhD, University of Leiden) is an independent researcher associated with the KITLV. He was previously associated with the Leiden Ethnosystems and Development Programme (LEAD), Faculty of Science, University Leiden and is author of *Bius, Parbaringin und Paniaran. Über Demokratie und Religion bei den Toba Batak Nordsumatras*. His main research interest is concerned with Sumatran cultures, especially traditional political and religious institutions.

