J. Hooykaas
A Balinese folktale on the origin of mice. (Met 2 platen)


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A BALINESE FOLKTALE
ON THE ORIGIN OF MICE

Three years ago I had an article published in the Bijdragen entitled 'The Mouse in Indonesian Folklore'.

I there demonstrated that the mouse was considered a supernatural being. Particularly in Bali and Lombok we find a certain feeling of awe towards fieldmice, resulting in a reluctance to kill them. Whenever a man actually destroys mice, for instance during a mice-plague, the spirits of the victims are placated by ceremonies. In Bali cremations are held as for human beings, with little turrets to carry the carcasses. In Muslim Lombok holy water is fetched from the grave of the mouse queen and used as medicine for the rice-stalks damaged by the plague. In pre-Muslim and pre-Hindu Sulawesi (Celebes) mice were still considered as divine ancestors, sometimes even as the bringers of rice from heaven.

In Bali, where we spent the best part of 1959, we found the awe towards mice and the reluctance to kill them still existing. Shortly before we arrived, a mice-plague had ruined the fields in the south as far as Denpasar and people had killed them and had held ceremonial cremations in order to propitiate their spirits.

When I was discussing mice with a Balinese sawah-owner, he hotly denied the advantage or even the possibility of killing them. His village had once been stricken by a mice-plague and people had killed them and had held ceremonial cremations in order to propitiate their spirits.

1 BKI 113, 1957, pp. 179—190.
2 Prof. Dr. J. L. Palache found a similar ambivalent meaning of the mouse in Israel and Greece. When discussing the significance of the golden mice in Noah's ark he pointed to the chthonic character of this animal. Coming from the underworld, on the one hand it brings pests, on the other hand it represents wisdom. Cf. Oostersch Genootschap in Nederland, Verslag van het Achtste Congres, Leiden, 1936; reprinted in 'Sinai en Paran, Opera Minora', Brill, Leiden, 1959, pp. 99—100.
This is illustrated in a Balinese drawing which I was able to buy. In the picture the head of a demon lies in the water. On a little island above there is a shrine onto which a naked god has descended. The god has a child’s appearance with shorn head, a child’s lock above his forehead and bracelets on arms and feet and a chain round the neck with an amulet-locket on it. The god is pointing downward in a threatening gesture. He is carrying a bow which he apparently has just used to shoot an arrow at the demon. An arrow sticks in the demon’s mouth, out of which blood drips. Mice crawl over the dead demon’s head.

The explanatory story which the artist told me runs as follows: The wicked demon, Buta Bawi Srënggi, was harrassing Batari Sri, the goddess of the rice. The God Siwa decided to help her; so He came down and killed the demon with his arrow. Then, however, mice appeared from the demon’s head, harrassing the goddess in another transfiguration.

Here again we find conviction of the immortality of mice. They are demons, malevolent spirits, and therefore the counterpart of the benevolent gods and as immortal as they are.

This I found again clearly demonstrated in a painting which a Balinese artist had used as a decoration for his lumbung (rice-granary). The artist is Gusti Njoman Lèmpad, an outstanding sculptor as well as an eminent draughtsman. He is one of the most original of Balinese artists.

His newly-built rice-granary was a work of art and craftsmanship.

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3 Bawi = babi = célèng = swine or boar, but the Kala-head on the picture is definitely not boarish. The head is adorned with a red hibiscus-flower behind the left ear, demonstrating that he had been intent on amorous purpose; here the artist well understood the story. But ‘Srënggi’, a word of Sanskrit origin, means ‘with horns, horned’ — and that the artist did nót understand or had forgotten. One feels inclined to surmise that ‘Bawi’ here might be (a mistake for, or to say the least of it) a variant of ‘Kala’, as I possess a puppet of the Balinese wayang kulit called Kala Srënggi and adorned with two horns, moreover with the same hibiscus-flower behind the ear. As L. Ch. Damais points out in BEFEO XLIX, 1959, p. 744/5 that reproductions of Balinese wayang-puppets are only too scarce in books on Bali, I here take the opportunity of adding a photograph of Kala Srënggi, which I owe to the help of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.

4 A young god with an arrow might be Kama, but Uma — Kama and Uma — Siwa in Indian Tantrism, cf. note 33a on p. 120 of my paper ‘De Gods-dienstige Ondergrond van het Prae-Muslimse Huwelijk op Java en Bali’ in Indonesië 10/2, April 1957.
The Killing of Buta Bawi Srënggi.
Buta Bawi Srënggi.
"So it has to be", the old artist said to us, "since it is a dwellingplace of Batari Sri."

The front had been painted in bright yellow, and on the façade a scene was depicted of the Pandawas with Draupadi as the central figure. For according to him, the name of that excellent queen Draupadi could only benefit the padi and was thus a fitting figure to be put on a rice granary.

On the lower part, however, was a painting in which I was specially interested because mice were to be seen on it. It was a representation of a kępuh-tree, copied from the hide kępuh-tree of the wayang kulit. This hide figure belongs to those which the performer places on the screen before the play starts. It is put next to Durga, the Goddess of Death. It represents a graveyard and so biers are depicted on it as well as crows carrying intestines in their beaks, and several demons. In the middle a chained demon (buta ranté) is portrayed. The purpose of the whole representations might be to keep in check the malevolent forces. And so amongst the other traditional demons mice, painted on the rice-granary, being the demons who threaten the goddess of rice, are also shown.

So here, as well as on the painting on paper which illustrates this article, mice are considered as malevolent spirits.

Dr. Jacoba Hooykaas