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How Friarbird Got His Helmet

Some Novel Features in an Eastern Indonesian Narrative

David Hicks

In 1992 Gregory Forth drew attention to the appearance of the friarbird as one of two antagonists in ten narratives (considered as a set) from eastern Indonesia, the other being another bird of variable species, and after subjecting the stories to a structural analysis, elicited several recurrent themes. The pivot upon which the plot turns is the quarrel between a friarbird and his antagonist. The former wishes to have a short day and night that alternate as at present whereas the other species wishes a day to last the equivalent of seven days alternating with a night lasting the equivalent of seven nights.

His paper subsequently motivated me to examine two comparable tales from Timor, the largest island in the region, that existed in the published literature (Hicks 1997), and which were obviously members of the “friarbird” set. In concluding my own analysis, I referred to a friarbird text I had collected while carrying out research on the island during my first fieldwork there in 1966–1967 and I remarked my wish to present it in published form

at some future time. Since that time I have the advantage of returning to the island and being able to discuss the matter of Friarbird¹ with residents of the locality from which I collected my original text so that the analysis I offer in this paper has the benefit of receiving comments by individuals to whose corpus of oral literature the narrative belongs. Their comments and the distinctive particularities of the version itself impart to the text scrutinized below four points of some singularity.

Ethnographic Background

The text transcribed below records a contest between a helmeted friarbird (*Philemon buceroides*)² and a large-billed crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos*). It is told for amusement but it is also an etiological tale that can be construed as describing the origin of three natural phenomena: (a) the respective lengths of day and night; (b) the “bald” head of the helmeted friarbird; and (c) the color of the feathers of the crow, the only species of crow known to exist on Timor.³ Several alternative terms for the helmeted friarbird exist in the Tetum language⁴ and in other

regional languages, including *kako'ak*; *kaeko'ak*; *koakau*. In the Viqueque subdistrict, which is in the southeastern part of East Timor, the friarbird is known as *kakoak* and the large-billed crow as *kaoa'*, and with minor dialectal variations these names are also their denotations in areas where the Tetum language is spoken (see below).⁵

The helmeted friarbird is speckled or spotted (*hakerek*) in dark colors and has as its most prominent physical characteristic a nape that lacks feathers, a feature that gives the creature the aspect of baldness and from which the helmet-like attribution almost certainly derives. The term by which it is known in the vernacular may be related to the word *kako'a*, “to be in a hurry,” “to hasten,” and its name is said to imitate its cry (Costa 2000: 182; Hull 1999: 154), yet it disaccords with ornithological evidence, as I shall remark below, and is at odds, too, with Forth’s suggestion that the name is consistent with the friarbird’s choice of a short day rapidly alternating with a short night.⁶ However one may represent its call that of *Philemon buceroides* as palpably different and easily distinguishable from that of the large-billed crow. Coates, Bishop, and Gardner (1997: 476) refer to the call of the friarbird as being “amongst the most characteristic sounds of the dawn chorus in the lowlands” . . . “an unhurried series of 2–3 identical, disyllabic, hoarse, nasal, low-pitched notes *aHGa*, *aHGa*, (*aHGa*) (duration 1.0–2.1 sec), repeated at 10–20 sec intervals, sometimes monotonously and sometimes increasing in volume; also *aa*, *aHGa* (duration 1.1 sec).” By contrast, the call of the large-billed crow is described as being easy to recognize by its guttural nature and resembles *wok*, *wok*, *wok*, in quite rapid

1 Where I refer to the species of the two birds in a generic sense I use lower case to denote them; where I refer to the protagonists of the narratives as individuals I use upper case. In parallel fashion when referring to the birds as characters in the narrative I represent their sex – appropriately in Timorese vignettes about animals – as male but where I refer to them as avian species I employ the neuter form.

2 Cf. Forth (1992: 428) who correctly confirms the identification. There are two species of friarbird on Timor, *Philemon inornatus*, a smaller species, and *Philemon buceroides*, of which there are two subspecies, *Philemon neglectus* and *Philemon buceroides*, the former being resident in the western Lesser Sundas, the latter in the eastern Lesser Sundas, including Timor (Coates, Bishop, and Gardener 1997: 207).

3 I am indebted to Mr. Colin Trainor, of Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia, for identifying both species of bird for me, providing me with information about their characteristics, and for suggesting other sources of information on their features and habits. In their respective dictionaries Cliff Morris (1984: 101), Ramos da Silva (n.d.: 52) and Raphael das Dores (1907: 138) identify the *kaoa'* correctly as a crow, though giving the generic name. The Costa dictionary (2000: 187) and that of Hull (1999: 170) designate what might appear to be the same bird as *kaoa'-lelok* and *ko'a-lelok* rather than simply as *kaoa'*, and they both incorrectly gloss it as a “small swallow,” which the *kaoa'* is most definitely not.

4 Like Mambai, the language from which the other two friarbird myths from East Timor (Hicks 1997) come, the Tetum language is one of the Austronesian languages that are spoken by the majority of persons on the island of Timor, and the Belu narrative analyzed by Forth (1992) from East Timor is also in Tetum. The vernacular languages of Timor fall into two principal groups, the aforementioned Austronesian languages and those that are conventionally denoted as the

non-Austronesian languages. To date there has been no report of friarbird appearing in any stories occurring among the body of oral literature in the four non-Austronesian languages of Timor, though in my 2005 field research I did learn from a speaker of Bunak, one of these non-Indonesian languages, that there does exist such a tale, but with some differences from the specimen I collected in Viqueque. The story is known quite widely throughout East Timor judging from the response I received from students in the seminar series I offered at the National University of East Timor in the Second Semester of the Academic Year 2004–2005. Coming from a number of linguistic traditions, including the non-Indonesian Makassai and Fataluku languages, as well as the Atoni language of the district of Oekusi, Nauhete, and the Tetum of the Same region, a number of them professed an acquaintance with the story.

5 The friarbird occurs widely throughout Timor, eastern Indonesia, and Australia. The large-billed crow is widespread throughout Asia.

6 One possible point of relevance here, I think, may lie in the fact that both *Philemon inornatus*, the smaller species, and *Philemon buceroides*, the larger species, are known in Tetum as *kakoak*.

succession (Anonymous 2005). In contrast to the examples cited by Forth, therefore, we have here a contrast between the unhurried call of *Philemon buceroides* and the more rapid call of the large-billed crow. However, the crucial matter, and which validates Forth's insight is that the alignment of temporal preference in the text transcribed below matches the pattern he has discerned in the narratives he analyzes. That is to say, the bird with the (relatively) quicker call favours a shorter temporal duration whereas the bird with the (relatively) more languid call favours the longer temporal duration. The natural contrast in call fits into the mythic contrast being made in the text I collected in Viqueque. Friarbird,⁷ with the relatively more languid call, wishes for a longer day and night (each being the equivalent of a week) and Crow, with the more rapid call, desires a day and night of shorter duration (of one day/night each).

These are not the only contrasts that impart a structure to the tale. The friarbird, which is almost ubiquitous on Timor, is described as inhabiting wooded areas, including those near human habitations, living singly, in pairs, or in small groups, being "noisy, conspicuous, and pugnacious," and "[visiting] flowering trees" (Coates, Bishop, and Gardner 1997: 476). Consistent with its pugnacious nature, in the narrative it seizes the initiative as the aggressor in the confrontation it provokes and its habit of visiting flowering trees is all of a piece with the vegetal nature of its diet. It consumes fresh fruit in contrast to the large-billed crow, which feeds on carrion, and for which reason is thought by the Timorese to be unclean. The opposition, clean/unclean, carries over into the two birds' respective images among the indigenous population. Thus whereas the friarbird enjoys a positive reputation in East Timor, as a "clean" bird, the large-billed crow is thought of in negative terms of uncleanness. Friarbird's auspicious attribute became evident during my stay in East Timor in 2005. On 19 March of that year, in conjunction with the Indonesian airline, Merpati, twice-weekly flights were inaugurated between Dili, capital of East Timor, and Kupang, the capital of Indonesian Timor. The single plane used to inaugurate the flights carried the name "Kakoak." The connotations of the large-billed crow are entirely different. A scavenger, which is said to emit "bad smells" resulting from the decay that itself derives from the rotted carcasses on which it feeds, the large-billed crow is regarded as a bird of ill-

omen. Thus, when in 2005 an eagle hit a plane carrying President José Alexandre Gusmão across the island, his political enemies alleged that his plane had been struck by a large-billed crow, an allegation they knew the general populace would interpret to be a presentiment of his death.⁸

The Texts

In the text⁹ that follows grammatical glosses for the terms *ona* and *tiha* come from Hull (1999).

Vernacular Text

Hori uluk manu fuik rua. Ida naran Kaoá. Ida naran Kakoak. Sira rua hafaha dabak. Iha meiodia, sira mai uma. Sira sani hudi sira atu han. Sira rua han. Kaoá ha'e fui tua. Sira rua hemu. Henu lanu. Sira rua começa kolia. Kakoak hateten ba iha Kaoá katak "Rai ne'e hakarak loron hitu ha'e naroman. Kalan hito ha'e nakukun." Hafoin Kaoá hateten, "Kalan ida, loron ida. Labele loron hito, kalan hitu, ne'e ita terus labele. Ne'e duni harakak loron ida, kalan ida." Kakoak lakoy, "Hakarak loron hitu, kalan hitu." Kaoá mos lakoy. "Hanesan ne'e. Ita hamlaha. Ita terus labele. Ne'e duni halo kalan ida, loron ida." Kakoak tuku ona Kaoá. Kaoá hodi boka baku Kakoak. Kakoak nia ulun tomak ran ona. Kakoak hola fali hudi nia latun hodi kose Kaoá metan hotu. Kakoak nia ulun temek tiha ona. Kaoá metan tiha ona. Fasi la mos ona.

Literal Translation

Hori uluk manu fuik rua. Ida naran
From beginning bird wild two. One named

⁸ I am indebted to Mr. José Texeira for furnishing me with this information in 2005.

⁹ The text was collected in Mamulak, a village (*povoação* or *aldeia*) in the *suku* (an indigenous sociopolitical unit composed of a varying number of descent groups) of Caraubalo in Viqueque subdistrict (*concelho*). They were dictated to me in Tetum on the night of January 26–27, 1967 by Mr. João Lopes with occasional assistance from his neighbour, Mr. Edmundo, both native speakers, and my gratitude goes to both of them. On a subsequent visit to the region of Caraubalo, but in another *suku* (that of Uma Ua'in Craik), I collected two more narrational variations, which I hope at sometime in the future to publish. A summary version of this narratives appears in Hicks (2004: 64f.), where, however, greater emphasis is laid on the narrative's etiological concern with the lengths of day/night than on its "just-so" story character.

⁷ From this point on all references to "Friarbird" and "friarbirds" refer exclusively to *Philemon buceroides*.

Kaoá. Ida naran Kakoak. Sira rua
Crow. One named Friarbird. They two

hafaha dabak. Iha meio-dia, sira
clearing away weeds rotten. Came midday, they

mai uma. Sira sani hudi
came home. They roasted banana

sira atu han. Sira
[postposed plural marker] in order to eat. They

rua han. Kaoá ha'e fui tua.
two ate. Crow the one who poured wine.

Sira rua hemu. Henu lanu. Sira rua
They two drank. Drank drunk. They two

começa kolia. Kakoak hateten ba iha
began speak. Friarbird spoke to towards

Kaoá katak "Rai ne'e hakarak loron hitu
Crow that "World this prefer day seven

ha'e naroman. Kalan hito ha'e nakukun."
that is light. Night seven that is darkness."

Hafoin Kaoá hateten, "Kalan ida, loron ida.
Then Crow said, "Night one, day one.

Labele loron hito, kalan hitu, ne'e ita
Cannot day seven, night seven, this we

terus labele. Ne'e duni harakak loron ida,
cannot suffer. Therefore preferable day one,

kalan ida." Kakoak lakoy, "Hakarak loron
night one." Kakoak dissented. "Prefer day

hitu, kalan hitu." Kaoá mos lakoy.
seven, night seven." Crow also dissented.

"Hanesan ne'e. Ita hamlahe. Ne'e ita terus
"It's like this. We hungry. This we suffer

labele. Ne'e duni halo kalan ida, loron ida."
cannot. Therefore make night one day one."

Kakoak tuku ona Kaoá. Kaoá
Kakoak hit [inchoative marker] Crow. Crow

hodi boka baku Kakoak. Kakoak nia ulun
with gourd hit Kakoak. Kakoak his head

temek ran ona. Kakoak hola
bald blood [inchoative marker] Kakoak seized

fali hudi nia latun hodi kose Kaoá
again banana its ashes with rubbed Crow

metan hotu Kakoak nia ulun temek
black all over Kakoak his head bald

taha
[marker indicating perfected action]

ona. Kaoá metan
[inchoative marker]. Crow black

taha
[marker indicating perfected action]

ona. Fasi la mos
[inchoative marker]. wash not clean

ona.
[inchoative marker].

Free Translation

A long time ago there were two wild birds. One was called Crow. The other was called Friarbird. They were clearing rotten weeds from their garden when midday came and they returned home to eat. They roasted bananas and ate them, after which they poured out some wine. The two of them drank. They drank until they became drunk. They began talking. Friarbird said to Crow, "I prefer this world to have seven days of light followed by seven days of darkness." Then Crow said, "The arrangement should be one night alternating with one day. A day lasting seven days followed by a night lasting seven nights we definitely can't have because we would suffer too much. Therefore, I prefer one day alternating with one night." But Friarbird did not want this arrangement, saying "I prefer a day lasting seven days followed by a night lasting seven nights." Crow continued to disagree. "It's like this. We shall be hungry. We must not suffer. Therefore, the best arrangement is to have one night alternating with one day." Friarbird hit Crow. Crow hit Friarbird with a gourd. Friarbird's entire head became covered in blood. Friarbird grabbed some banana ash and rubbed Crow's entire body with it until his body was black all over. Friarbird's head remained bald and Crow's body remained black for he could never wash himself clean.

Commentary

From hearing Timorese tell the tale and from reciting the tale myself in the presence of Timorese it is clear that for the local audience the feature of the story that focuses most of their attention is the consequences of the fight that Friarbird initiates rather than the details of the dispute that provoked Friarbird into launching his onslaught in the first place. Thus one of my Tetum consultants flatly dismissed any suggestion that the friarbird had "lost" (*lakon*) the argument in that his preference never came to be realized. She remarked that "They were drunk (*lanu*)," and presumably incapable while in that inebriated state of paying much attention to

matters of cosmological magnitude. The interpretation she ascribed to the duel emphasized instead the adjustment to the physical appearance of the two antagonists that resulted from their altercation. The story resembled a “fable” (*fábula* in Portuguese) she averred. The indigenous interpretation carries special authority in matters exegetical, of course, and the story of Friarbird must be regarded in such a light, but indigenous exegesis need not exhaust all the explanatory resources that can be mustered in explication of indigenous verbal fancies nor obviate the possibility of advancing complementary – or even alternative – interpretations. Within the comparative contextual framework Forth has established it becomes possible to assess the significance of the encounter between the two species in different terms. In this context the etiological intent in respect of diurnality and nocturnality of this myth cannot be dismissed and in no way does it vitiate the indigenous ascription by so characterizing it.

The principle of analogy Forth (1992: 430) discerns at work ordering ideas in the tales he analyzes operates also in the above text. There is, for instance, the hint of an incipient opposition between nature and culture in that as a natural corporeal emission, the blood that spills out from Friarbird’s head, contrasts with the charcoal that covers the body of Crow, and which of course is a cultural product resulting from cooking. Another contrast may be witnessed in the different modes of aggression employed by the two birds for whereas Friarbird’s onslaught is carried out by means of a gourd (which incidentally is another index of nature) and draws blood, that of Crow merely consists of rubbing (with the ashes). The result of these different applications of aggression is that whereas the friarbird’s body is subjected to actual physical mutilation the crow merely receives an (presumably) unwelcome cosmetic adjustment to his body. Nevertheless, unlike Friarbird, the only part of whose body affected is the head, Crow’s entire body undergoes transformation.

One recurrently pervasive contrast Forth elicits concerns life and death. He demonstrates that the narratives of Friarbird he analyzes form “a narrative tradition that in some instances admits the origin of death” (1992: 436), at the same time as showing that they reveal “the primacy of the opposition of night and day over that of death and life (birth).” The contrast between death and life is undeveloped in the above narrative, yet some indication may be there all the same. Crow’s blackness links him with Timorese associations regarding death; he feeds on carrion; and he is a harbinger of death. However, another finding Forth gleans from his analysis is

that in these tales life and death succeed each other as part of a continuing cycle. This also secures confirmation in the Viqueque narrative. Crow succeeds in bringing about the rapid alternation of day and night he desires, a result consistent with Forth’s comparative conclusion that the swifter cycle is “a convenient way of accounting for the entrance of death into a deathless world . . . or of light into a previously darkened universe” (1992: 436).¹⁰ The lengthier cycle Friarbird wishes for is, on the other hand, all of a piece with a longer duration of life (and death).

Conclusions

The interest of the above version of the Friarbird narrative lies in the singular qualities that differentiate it from the other twelve versions that have already been published. (a) We have here, for the first time, a version in which it is Friarbird, not his adversary, who is advocating the longer day/longer night. (b) Again, and for the first time in these narratives, Friarbird “loses” in the sense that the temporal durations he wishes are not realized. (c) Whereas the etiological meanings of the myth in the other versions concern the origins of the lengths of day and night and in some of the tales the relationship between death and life, local informants characterized the myth as accounting solely for the origin of the friarbird’s helmet and the large-billed crow’s black color rather than the origin of the relative lengths of day and night. (d) Finally, according to indigenous exegesis, there is no imputation of victory or defeat on the part of either of the two adversaries.

The text analyzed above, with the benefit of my informants’ commentaries, further illuminates the significance of this creature in Timorese collective representations and makes it possible to view the cumulative set of Friarbird narratives, which now amount to thirteen tales, in a somewhat broader perspective.

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¹⁰ It also is in accordance with one of the principal motifs of Tetum religious thought, viz., “the cycle of life,” which I have identified elsewhere (Hicks 1984: 7).

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Medium oder Message?

Wayang Kulit

zwischen Technik und Kunst

Annette Hornbacher

Das javanische Wayang Kulit sei “die Kathedrale Javas”, ließ mich vor rund zehn Jahren der deutsch-javanische Philosoph Franz Magnis-Suseno in Jakarta wissen. Gemeint war damals nicht nur der Umstand, dass Wayang Kulit Aufführungen seit ihren Anfängen zur Zeit der hindu-javanischen Königreiche Gemeinschaft stiften, die architektonische Metapher zielte v. a. auf Art und Anlass dieser Gemeinschaft. Das javanisch-balinesische Schattenspiel ist ursprünglich – und auf Javas hinduistischer Nachbarinsel Bali bis heute – eine rituelle Theaterform, die den mythischen Helden dichterischer Überlieferungen durch die flackernden Schatten der flachen filigran gekerbten Lederpuppen, v. a. aber durch die mündliche Dichtung des Dalang, des Schattenspielers, performativ Leben und Gegenwart verleiht.

Die reflexive Anpassung mythischer Überlieferungen in dieser mündlich-performativen Kunst macht zugleich ihre ethische und Gemeinschaft stiftende Qualität aus. In ihr gründet die Autorität des Dalang und sie ist Gegenstand zahlreicher ethnologischer Untersuchungen geworden.

Die Besonderheit von Jan Mrázeks Buch “Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre. Contemplations on the Art of Javanese *wayang kulit*”¹ besteht nun darin, die kulturgeschichtliche Herkunft des Schattenspiels ebenso wie dessen rituelle und mythische Bedeutung weitgehend in den Hintergrund zu rücken, um seine Beschreibung stattdessen ganz auf das Schattenspiel als performative Technik und besonders als Bewegungstechnik des Dalang zu konzentrieren. Auch Mrázek bedient sich dabei einer architektonischen Metapher. Diese weicht jedoch in einem entscheidenden Punkt vom Bild der “Kathedrale” ab: Wo dies die Gemeinschaft stiftende Funktion des Wayang Kulit direkt mit dessen religiös-ritueller Bedeutung assoziiert, ist das Schattenspiel für Mrázek nur insofern “building” (8), als es ein vom Dalang kraft seiner technischen Fertigkeiten hervorgebrachtes Konstrukt

1 Mrázek, Jan: Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre. Contemplations on the Art of Javanese *wayang kulit*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005. 567 pp. ISBN 90-6718-252-4. (Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 230) Price: € 45.00.