

# Berichte und Kommentare

## Friarbird on Roti

Gregory Forth

In a recent article (2007) I revisited a collection of myths from eastern Indonesia which feature a competition between two birds. The outcome of the contest determines the present order of the world. Some variants concern the alternation of a brief day with an equally brief night, while others account for the origin of death but also the origin of birth and the multiplication of humankind. A minority (just three in a corpus of 13) includes both themes. In the majority of versions of the myth (11 of 13), one avian contestant – in all but one instance, the victor – is a friarbird (genus *Philemon*, usually the Helmeted friarbird). Although most often a pigeon, the friarbird's opponent is by contrast rather more variously identified. Variants of the myth have so far been collected from different parts of the islands of Flores, Sumba, and Timor. The present note extends this range by adding another region, the island of Roti, located off Timor's southwestern tip. By the same token, it affords further insight into what is constant and what is variable in this mythological corpus.

Provided by a Rotinese named J. W. Toepoe, the Rotinese myth was recorded by J. C. G. Jonker (1913: 609–611). A summary version also appears in an article by Kleiweg de Zwaan, who cites it in a comparative essay on Indonesian stories and beliefs involving animals (1916). The main bird character, called *koak* in Rotinese, is not identified by Jonker, who simply notes that in Kupang Malay it is called “morning bird” (*boeroeng siang*). As suggested by the similarity of the Rotinese name to the names of the same bird found on Sumba, Flores, and Timor, however, and as confirmed by Verheijen who gives the name in two Rotinese dialects as *koa* and *koa'* (1976), the species is indeed a friarbird, and more specifically the Helmeted friarbird (*Philemon buceroides*). Jonker (1908: 241) states there

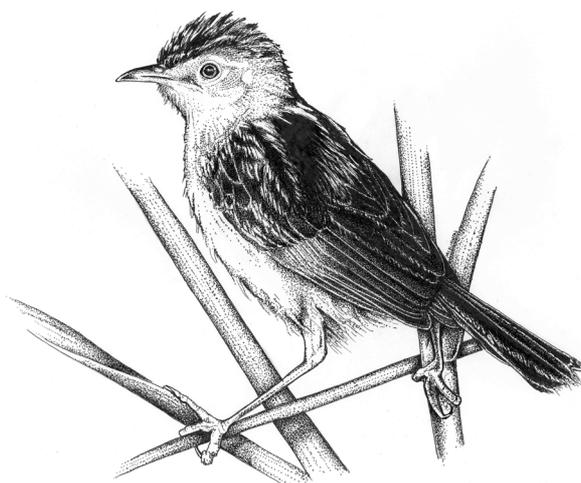


Fig. 1: Zitting cisticola (*Cisticola juncidis*) shown perched on a grass stem. Drawing by Donna McKinnon.

are two sorts of *koa*, a “white-eyed” (*mata-fula*) and a “red-eyed” (*mata-pila*) variety, but this distinction appears not to correspond to different species of *Philemon*, at least not on Roti.<sup>1</sup> The friarbird's opponent in this case, a bird Rotinese call *tainaiik*, is described by Jonker (1913: 609) only as a “tiny bird.” According to Verheijen, the *tai-na'uk* (Verheijen's transcription, which I hereafter employ) is the species *Cisticola juncidis*, or the Zitting cisticola, a bird once better known as the “fantail warbler.” I say more about this species below. First, I present a translation of Jonker's Dutch rendition of the Rotinese text:

<sup>1</sup> The “red-eyed” variety is evidently the olive-brown oriole (*Oriolus melanotis*). As a synonym of *koa-mata-pila*, Jonker gives *koa-kèsek* (without any definitive gloss; 1980, s. v. *kèsek*), while Verheijen (1976) lists what is almost certainly the same term as *koa-késé* and *koa kété* and specifies these as names for the oriole in different Rotinese dialects. That this bird should be classified with the friarbird is consistent with Coates and Bishop's (1997) description of it as a “visual mimic” of the Helmeted friarbird. The calls of the two birds are also similar; during his visit to Roti, Verheijen himself mistook a vocalizing friarbird for *Oriolus melanotis*.

A Koak and a Tai-na'uk bird were friends. On a certain day and at a particular time, they challenged one another to a foot-stamping contest, to see who was able to break the feet of the other. The Koak said: "If I stamp on your thin feet, then it will be done." But the Tai-na'uk said: "Even though your feet are ten times as big as mine, if I stamp on them they will break in two." The Koak then became angry and said: "Go ahead, if you are a man (that is, if you dare), just come and smash my feet!" And the Tai-na'uk spoke: "Very well, if you are also brave enough, just come and stamp first!" And he stretched out his feet. Although the Koak trod repeatedly, he could not break the feet of the Tai-na'uk. The Tai-na'uk then scrambled about and found a small stone, and he said: "You have trodden in vain, now I shall take my turn at stamping." So the Koak stretched out his feet and the Tai-na'uk struck them with the small stone, and the Koak's feet broke in two. The Koak took flight with his feet hanging limp. Wherever he went he could not alight; so he flew directly to the sky to search about for a healer. He kept flying until he arrived at the house of Boela-kai [the Moon] and the dwelling of Lèdo-hòro [the Sun]. He grasped his feet; and he made a sound and raised his voice all the while weeping, so that all the mucus came out of his nose and the tears fell from his eyes. With sadness and in much need, he spoke to the Sun and Moon, saying: "Boela-kai, who is very charitable, and Lèdo-hòro, who is most merciful, protect me and give me refuge in your wide shelter and your long shadow, for I am like someone abandoned and an orphan, I am one who suffers from distress and defect." And so it happened that Boela-kai had pity and Lèdo-hòro had mercy, and they protected the Koak in their wide lee and gave him refuge in their long shadow. They rubbed with the knowledge inherent in their kind, and straightened out with the art proper to the land, until the broken legs had joined together and the smashed muscles were mended, so that the luck came back and the fortune returned. And so was the Koak lucky and fortunate.

The Koak then returned to earth in good health and a state of well-being and his heart remained mindful, in the knowledge that he would not forget and that he would retain a memory which he would not discard. And so he came to consider Boela-kai as a mother who had borne him, and Lèdo-hòro as a father who had made him, and as the one who had created and one who had formed him.

Thus it is that just when the dawn breaks in the east and the morning comes to the "head" (of the sky, the eastern horizon), the Koak raises his voice as though he were going to meet his mother, and as though going to fetch she who has formed him. And when the day is in the west and the sun is close to the "tail" (of the sky, the western horizon), he then cries out singing or chattering, as if he were taking leave of his father and sending off the one who created him.

So it has become a proverb which is stated and broadcast: the Koak sings or prattles looking for the sun when it rises, and the civet cat wails seeking the moon when it appears anew.

The foregoing is a fairly literal translation from the Dutch text, which itself evidently retains much of the parallelism and poetic idiom characteristic especially of more formal genres of Rotinese ritual speaking. The term I translate as "foot, feet" is mostly Dutch *poot*. Sometimes, this word is more accurately glossed as "leg," and in one place in the text "legs" (Dutch *beenderen*) are mentioned specifically. But this is a minor point that does not affect the purport of the myth, not least because, unlike what one finds in some other myths, the injury done to the friarbird does not cause any permanent alteration in the bird's physical appearance.

The Rotinese story obviously differs from other eastern Indonesian myths that feature the friarbird, particularly as it does not explicitly concern the origin of night and day (that is, nights and days of present duration) nor indeed the origin of death and birth. Nevertheless, its connection to these is indicated in several ways. Apart from the appearance of the friarbird (*koak*) as the central character of the narrative, the point of departure is a competition, or contest, between this bird and another bird, the cisticola, initially described as a friend of the friarbird.

In most other eastern Indonesian friarbird stories, the bird wins the contest and defeats its opponent – usually the imperial pigeon – thereby bringing about the present temporal alternation of a short day followed by an equally short night. In the Rotinese tale, by contrast, the friarbird is defeated by its avian opponent. Nevertheless, the friarbird is also the loser in a story from Viqueque in East Timor, a Tetum-speaking region which, linguistically, is closely related to Roti. What is more, a similar fate partly befalls the friarbird in other eastern Indonesian variants; for example, in the Nage (central Flores) myth, following the friarbird's defeat of the imperial pigeon, the pigeon takes revenge by selling the friarbird into slavery. The friarbird is then later ransomed by the sunbird, a tiny bird comparable in regard to its small size, and arguably its feisty character, to the Rotinese *tai-na'uk*. Also, as a consequence of the friarbird's defeat in the Rotinese story (the smashing of its feet), the bird becomes associated with, and more particularly indebted to, the sun and the moon. And it is for this reason that the grateful friarbird comes to call at those temporal boundaries defined by the appearance or disappearance of these heavenly bodies – thus the two halves of the 24-hour cycle that we presently know. Thus in this version, too, the friarbird is associated with the alternation of night and day, and comes to be so as the result of a contest with another bird.

As in other parts of eastern Indonesia, the names of the sun and moon on Roti can refer to the Supreme Being or divinity. Therefore, the friarbird's appeal to the two heavenly bodies parallels the bird's seeking assistance from the Creator in the Sumbanese variant of the myth (Forth 2007: 511). At the same time, mention of both moon and sun can be understood as a function of the canonical parallelism so typical of Rotinese narrative and oratorical composition. In this idiom, the names of the two heavenly bodies can refer to a unity. Yet it is clear that it is primarily the sun with which the friarbird is associated. Thus, whereas it is first stated that the bird considers the moon as its mother and the sun as its father, in describing the bird's consequent vocal habits, the two parents are identified respectively with the rising sun (its mother) and the setting sun (its father). The friarbird's specific association with the sun is further confirmed by the proverb given at the end of the text. Here, the bird is paired with another creature, the "civet cat" (probably a reference to the Palm civet, *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*), an arboreal and largely nocturnal mammal which, particularly by way of its vocalization, is linked with the moon.

As noted, the friarbird's opponent is the Zitting cisticola, a very small bird about 10 to 11 centimetres in length with relatively long, thin legs. It would seem to be mostly the small size and thin legs that make it a suitable opponent of the friarbird in the Rotinese myth, at least if the cisticola's victory in the foot-stamping competition is understood as an ironic defeat of a larger by a much smaller adversary. The outcome is of course accomplished by trickery, a common theme in Indonesian animal tales generally but not in other eastern Indonesian myths involving the contesting friarbird. There are other respects in which the cisticola contrasts with the friarbird, a medium-sized bird about as large as a pigeon. The little bird inhabits grassland and, except when it engages in a circling song flight, is frequently found skulking near the ground. This environmental association is reflected in the Rotinese name, which incorporates a form of *na'u*, "grass" (Jonker 1908: 383; *tai* possibly derives from a verb meaning "to hold onto" or "to hang from", Jonker 1908: 586f., perhaps referring to the bird's habit of building its nest on tall grass stems). Also called the Streaked fantail warbler and Fan-tailed warbler, the bird is named after the way it fans out its tail in flight. Its currently more common name, Zitting cisticola, on the other hand, refers to its vocalization, an insect-like "zit-zit-zit" sound also given in flight. In all these respects, the cisticola is quite different from the friarbird, yet it is not obvious

that any of them motivate or otherwise contribute to the mythical opposition between the two avian characters. Again, the opposition appears to be empirically grounded in the cisticola's small size and slight build. In this respect, moreover, the bird plays a part comparable to that of the sunbird in Nage myth. Another tiny bird, the sunbird does not defeat the friarbird. However, as noted, it ransoms the friarbird, and to that extent implicitly proves superior to both this bird and its captor, the imperial pigeon.

While evidently not striking any particular contrast to the figure of the friarbird, the cisticola's tail, which it fans in flight, may nonetheless point to connections with other Indonesian myths featuring contesting birds. The friarbird's counterpart among the Tetum-speaking Belu of Central Timor (another region closely related linguistically to Roti) is a small, unidentified bird called *berliku*. Hicks describes this as a very small bird with a "forked" tail (1997: 200). Morris (1984: 13) identifies the *berliku* as the Willie wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), a member of the fantail family (Rhipiduridae). Although belonging to a family distinct from the cisticolas, fantails – as their name should suggest – are also in the habit of fanning out their tails. Contrary to Morris, however, the Willie wagtail does not in fact occur on Timor. Therefore, the *berliku* must be another sort of small bird, and the focus on its tail in available descriptions may suggest, as one possibility, the cisticola, the species Rotinese call *tai-na'uk*. An alternate possibility, of course, is another species of fantail (genus *Rhipidura*), such as the widespread Rufous fantail (*R. rufifrons*). In either case, to describe the tail as "forked" would be equally inexact. Nevertheless, when spread out the tail feathers of the both fantails and the cisticola (or fan-tailed warbler), could conceivably, albeit somewhat inaccurately, be described as "forked."

Possibly taken from an older Portuguese source, Hull glosses *bereliku* as "Timorese nightingale" (2001: 38). Although ornithologically quite inaccurate, it is of some interest that the European nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*), a relatively small thrush, 16 cm in length, is typically found skulking near the ground where it also builds its nest, much like cisticolas. It also possesses a relatively long tail that is "obvious in flight" (Peterson et al. 1993: 173f.). Morphologically as well, and particularly in regard to overall shape and colouring, nightingales and cisticolas are not dissimilar.

Despite its ironic defeat by a much smaller bird, the fact that the Rotinese friarbird is finally saved (in this case by the sun and moon) suggests an overall similarity between symbolic associations of the species on Roti and values represented by the

bird elsewhere, particularly on Flores. Owing to the wounded friarbird's healing by the heavenly bodies, the bird is declared by the Rotinese narrator to be "lucky and fortunate." This recalls the Nage deployment of the friarbird as a simile for a human type – "a loquacious but also a 'lucky' person of the sort Nage admire" (Forth 2007: 507). As regards loquaciousness, it is further noteworthy that, in the Rotinese story, the bird is twice described not only as "singing" (when it vocalizes at the rising and setting of the sun) but also as "prattling" or "chattering" (Dutch *snappen*). These last glosses fairly characterize friarbird vocalizations, on Flores compared to human speech (Forth 2007: 507). At the same time, they affirm these as the main perceptual feature motivating the friarbird's association with both daybreak and sunset, a point previously demonstrated in regard to the bird's appearance in the majority of eastern Indonesian myths relating the origins of daylight and the 24-hour cycle.

It should finally be mentioned how the Rotinese story, although clearly connected with other stories from the Timor region linking the friarbird with diurnal-nocturnal alternation, simultaneously exemplifies another widespread theme in Indonesian animal tales. This concerns how injuries resulting from a contest or conflict between natural kinds ostensibly explain distinctive features of the species concerned. Friarbird myths from Flores and Timor provide cases in point, describing the origin of the featherless head that lends the friarbird its English name (Forth 2007: 510, 512). As noted, the Rotinese variant does not function in this way, as following the friarbird's hobbling by the cisticola, its lower limbs are restored to their original condition by the sun and moon. Nevertheless, in regard to the particular nature of the competition in which the two birds engage, the Rotinese narrative is comparable to a Moluccan (or Alforesse) story (Kleiweg de Zwaan 1916: 458). The following summarizes Kleiweg de Zwaan's Dutch version of the narrative:

Meeting in the forest, two birds named Langkou and Moupou came across a large thick root with a small hole in it. The Moupou saw that he could place his foot in this hole, which he did and covered it with moss. The bird then proposed to the Langkou that they should hold a contest to see which of them, by kicking at the root, could make a hole in it. The Langkou went first, but he was unable to make a hole in the root. Next it was the Moupou's turn. He kicked at the spot where the hole was, which he had covered with moss. Showing him the hole, he then said to the Langkou: "See, I am indeed stronger than you." The Langkou became very angry and embarrassed and out of envy slammed on the Moupou's

feet until they broke. Thus it is that, since this time, all moupou birds walk with a limp.

Although it is unclear which species the names might designate, the fact that the *moupou* was able to put its foot in a small hole suggests that this bird has small feet and, therefore, presumably small legs. In this respect it would appear comparable to the Rotinese *tai-na'uk*, the cisticola. A further resemblance lies in the circumstance that both birds win their respective contests through trickery. At the same time, in the Moluccan story it is the trickster, possibly the smaller of the two antagonists, who suffers bodily injury.

### Conclusion

In relation to other eastern Indonesian myths featuring the friarbird, the Rotinese story supports several general observations. First, it exemplifies another aetiological tale linking this bird with the alternation of day and night. In this case, the connection is largely expressed by the bird's association with the sun and moon, an association that appears particularly close insofar as, in reference to its restoration by the two heavenly bodies, the bird is described as being "created" and "formed" by them, in a way comparable to parents giving birth to a child. Despite the parallelistic invocation of both heavenly bodies, however, the friarbird is specifically connected with the day and the sun. The connection is most clearly demonstrated in the Rotinese text by the recursive replacement of the opposition of sun and moon by the rising and setting sun. In other eastern Indonesian variants of the myth, the friarbird's opponent is more closely associated with the night. The cisticola is not so associated. But this is neither here nor there, for as shown by the friarbird's association with both night and day (or moon and sun), and especially with their alternation, or points of transition, the friarbird represents an encompassing, and its avian opponent an encompassed value (Forth 2007: 506). Finally, it should be noted that the friarbird's association with nocturnal-diurnal alternation lends further support to the conclusion that, in this eastern Indonesian corpus, it is the contrast of night and day that is primary, and that the origin of death (or of death and birth) is a secondary theme which is related metaphorically to the first and in all probability has developed by analogy to it (Forth 2007: 507).

I am grateful to Dr. Marie-Antoinette Willemsen and Professor James Fox for providing information from Verhei-

jen's article on Rotinese birds, access to which I did not have when I began writing this article.

## References Cited

### Coates, Brian J., and K. David Bishop

1997 A Guide to the Birds of Wallacea. Sulawesi, the Moluccas, and Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia. Alderley: Dove Publications.

### Forth, Gregory

2007 Pigeon and Friarbird Revisited. A Further Analysis of an Eastern Indonesian Mythico-Ornithological Contrast. *Anthropos* 102: 495–513.

### Hicks, David

1997 Friarbird on Timor. Two Mambai Myths of Avian Rivalry. *Anthropos* 92: 198–200.

### Hull, Geoffrey

2001 Standard Tetum-English Dictionary (Revised and Expanded). Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin in association with the University of Sydney. [2nd ed.]

### Jonker, J. C. G.

1908 Rottineesch-Hollandsch woordenboek. Leiden: E. J. Brill

1913 Bijdrage tot de kennis der Rottineesche Tongvallen. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 68: 521–622.

### Kleweg de Zwaan, J. P.

1916 Dierenverhalen en dieren-bijgeloof bij de inlanders van den Indischen Archipel. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 71: 447–471.

### Morris, Cliff

1984 Tetun-English Dictionary. Canberra: The Australian National University. (Pacific Linguistics, C, 83)

### Peterson, Roger Tory, Guy Mountfort, and Philip Arthur Dominic Hollom

1993 Birds of Britain and Europe. London: HarperCollins. [5th rev. and enlarged ed.]

### Verheijen, Jilis A. J.

1976 Some Data on the Avifauna of the Island of Roti, Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia. *Zoologische Mededelingen* 50/1: 1–21.

## Anmerkungen zu einer tätowierten Bärenskulptur als Ausdruck eines bikulturellen Neuseelands

Georg Schifko

Im Jahre 2002 wurde in Berlin das völkerverbindende Projekt der “United Buddy Bears” aus der Taufe gehoben. Unter dem Motto “Wir müssen uns besser kennenlernen ... dann können wir uns bes-

ser verstehen, mehr vertrauen und besser zusammenleben” (Herlitz und Herlitz 2006: 8) sind nahe dem Brandenburger Tor Bärenskulpturen mit erhobenen Händen ausgestellt worden, die jeweils ein konkretes Land repräsentieren (Abb. 1). Die Bären wurden durchgehend von Künstlern aus dem jeweils dargestellten Land gestaltet. Deren Aufgabe war es, einen normierten “Bärenrohling” durch Bemalen – und bisweilen auch durch Applikation von Gegenständen – zu einem Botschafter des eigenen Landes zu machen. Die illustre Runde ist zudem durch Bären ergänzt worden, die zu einer friedlichen Koexistenz aller (Welt-)Religionen bzw. aller Menschen auffordern. Ein weiterer Bär erinnert auch daran, dass man nicht nur mit Menschen, sondern mit allem Leben respekt- und verantwortungsvoll umgehen sollte.

Das Projekt der “United Buddy Bears” hat jedoch nicht nur einen rein symbolischen Charakter, denn regelmäßig werden einige Bären versteigert und der Erlös an UNICEF und viele kleine lokale Kinderhilfsorganisationen weitergegeben. Die verkauften Exemplare werden laufend ersetzt und gemeinsam mit den anderen Bären um die Welt geschickt. Die Ausstellung der “United Buddy Bears” war bereits in anderen Ländern Europas, in Asien, Australien und Afrika zu sehen. Erwähnenswert ist auch der Umstand, dass die Bären immer in alphabetischer Ordnung der jeweiligen Gastlandsprache aufgestellt werden und sich daraus oftmals neue und, unter einem politischen Aspekt betrachtet, sehr interessante Nachbarschaften ergeben (Herlitz und Herlitz 2006: 9).

Bereits bei einer flüchtigen Betrachtung der Exponate fällt auf, dass einige Künstler bei der Gestaltung der Bären sehr viel mit landesüblichen Klischees gearbeitet haben, die einen hohen Wiedererkennungswert versprechen. Dies ist z. B. beim Irland-Bären der Fall, der dem Betrachter als grüngefärbter, mit Kleeblättern (*shamrock*) und dem für Irland typischen keltischen Hochkreuz verzierter Leprechaun<sup>1</sup> entgegentritt. Die Benutzung solch allgemein bekannter Symbole erleichtert zwar sehr die Zuordnung eines Bären zu einem konkreten Land, doch geht dies ein wenig auf Kosten des Reizes, der eine intensivere Auseinandersetzung mit dem Objekt als lohnend erscheinen lässt. Im Gegensatz zu solch “Stereotypen-Bären”, die geradezu einem Fremdenverkehrsbüro entsprungen zu sein scheinen, gibt es vereinzelt auch Exemplare, die aus ethnologischer Perspektive viel interessanter sind. So macht z. B. der mit einem Federkopfschmuck ausgerüstete Vertreter Brasiliens als “Indianer-Bär” ganz explizit auf den Schutz der Rechte der indigenen Völker aufmerksam. Ebenso