

The Birds: Burung – Bird

written by Guest Contributor | February 13, 2018



Five elements maketh the traditional Javanese man: a job, house, respect, wife and a bird.

In the last category a substitute seemed possible, cat or dog coming in a couple of mentions. One of the commentators somehow included a *kris*, sword, and another a horse in their list.

Along the *gangs* and narrow alleys in Jogja the birds hung high in the cages were usually missed until the song unexpectedly alerted. Tall, roomy cages for mostly minute birds that often needed searching through the bars. Like in most cities, birds of the air were almost non-existent in Jogja, even pigeons uncommon, and this despite a couple of strong neighbourhood associations in the urbanized *kampungs* off Malioboro.

In these narrow passageways too domesticated owls could be regularly sighted – *hantu*, which also served as the word for ghost. Otherwise night starlings flitted along the river and through stands of trees where they remained in the city.

After three or four weeks of the ever-growing impression the weekly *Burung* – The Bird needed to be purchased from one of the pushcarts up beyond the station. As commonly in Indonesian cities, the newspaper had been chanced upon hanging as if to dry on the front of the cart. On the cover an odd orange-breasted native with a crow crown had drawn attention. At Rp12,000 the newspaper was clearly for well-heeled enthusiasts. (The pigeons were the lower end of the fraternity, two single sides devoted to them in the pages of *Burung*.)

Chirpy Superior Bird Feed paid for page one prominence, as did a medicinal spray treatment of some kind. The accompanying digest of features within promised tips for strong-voiced chirping and breeding that could make one rich.

Together with other such material came thirty-five pages of announcements of triumphs and prizes in the various singing competitions in Central and Eastern Java, and also notices of those upcoming. (Jakarta and the West was too distant and must have had a separate magazine devoted to that quarter.)

Four million rupiah was the lure in one particular competition; mostly the range was four to eight hundred thousand. Clearly well-regulated and keenly contested affairs.

Many of the names of champions derived from Western popular culture – *Superhero, Satelit, Komandan, Master, Baron*. Thirty-five pages of fifty, sixty and more winners per page amounted to a cast of a great many thousand in the singing contests alone, where lovebirds dominated. The famous lovebirds–English usage–from the pages of cheap poetical inspiration; they were native to other colonial quarters, not in fact equatorial South-East Asia.

There had been word of a prominent bird market in Jogja at the first visit to the city the year before. Some time ago the market had down-scaled and moved further out of town. There was little to hope for of course; but then the birds along the path kept announcing themselves. One final prod arrived a few days previously when a visit to the French Cultural Centre found a *becak* driver under a tree out front with his bird hanging high in the branches above his seat. The chap certainly did not live in one of the houses of that particular quarter.

Two short commuter bus rides amounting to little over a half hour altogether found the place, with a young guide easing the venture. Eagerly inquisitive smiling fellow passengers lugging bundles, sharing the fragrance of their vegetable purchases and chatting with their fellows needed to be left to continue on their way.

Only a couple of months herself in Jogja, the guide Mahshushah knew the market from passes in the buses; enquiries along the way sufficed otherwise. Without designated stops for the local vehicles one needed to keep an eye-out for the numbering and nicknames on the windscreen.

The Arabic Mahshushah–Special Person–broke down among friends to Cusy, and for Westerners Susi. Born in Madura off the coast of Surabaya, Susi was an orphan brought up by her grandmother without having known either parent. Since settling in Jogja she had found a place in a *pesantren* where she was studying and teaching in the afternoons. Through the student groups she had found the American convert Faris, a mutual acquaintance.

Lovebirds predominated at the market, over-coloured in their particular tone of fluroscent yellow and green. At first hearing their casual twitter was equally unimpressive. No doubt a tin ear did not help; possibly one needed to listen more carefully. Much other similar twittering was audible in the aisles of the market.

The musicality that was particularly noteworthy and striking during the morning was in fact that of Susi's limited English. Repeatedly in answering questions and other exchange the young woman fell into a pronounced sing-song lilt that must have been a carry-over from her concentration on the Holy Book.

– *La-di-da-da-di, sir.*

There were a dozen girls dorming together and encouraging each other at the *pesantren*, where thus far Susi had mastered the two first chapters and the more difficult last three of the Qur'an.

Susi was perfectly right of course to above all pity the birds and other animals in their cages. A traditional Muslim girl in baby pink dress and scarf, while we were still in the first aisles Susi announced she could not like a man who kept a bird in a cage.

The lovebird coloring was almost as suspicious as that of the young chicks which had been spray-painted in novelty garish tones in order to entice young TV children. (The colors would fade over time, the vendor reassured after guessing the unfavorable reaction.)

Tails, beaks, speckling and subtle eye-shadow such as one saw in more venturesome young girls of Susi's kind on the streets and buses produced more allure than this love bird high color.

For Australian eyes it was surprising to find caged mynahs.

Under close observation through the bamboo rails a large black rooster's lustrous feathers appeared supernatural—thin streaks of silver on some angles as the bird turned in the cage, then corrections as it turned again restlessly in its tight circle. A canny Javanese witch or *dukun* would have made capital from such an iridescent show-piece in her routine.

Though birds predominated, numerous other animals were also sold here—crickets, frogs, lizards, rabbits, cats and dogs; some of the quick-darting rodents seeming themselves capable of flight.

Susi guessed correctly that the piles of bananas were in fact feed, hung up and part-peeled for smaller birds. Rocking cages overhead where birds dashed themselves against the bars underlined Susi's point about the confinement.

With some effort and the recall of native documentary one could imaginatively assemble something of the forest and jungle that had once held this extensive bird-life. Remnants of habitat remained of course even on Java; Kalimantan was becoming a draw in the adventure tourist market.

One was reminded of Babi's old mountain *kampung* joke concerning the trapping of the all too elusive creatures of the air. A dash of salt on the tail of a birdie and you were a chance, the sly old devil always delivered po-faced.

Surprisingly, when the joke was shared with Susi and then relayed to a couple of old hands seated among the cages in the shade, one of the men understood the matter differently.

Oya! they did something similar, he replied. Sticky jack-fruit sap dabbed on the wing by way of a long bamboo prong. The man went inside a hut to fetch the kind of thing they employed. Once one had applied it to the feathers you had the prey keeling over and falling into your hand from the perch. Without jack-fruit—in the city for example—*Elephant Glue* worked equally well. A helpful friend from the adjacent stall displayed a half-used tube.

– Fighting, fighting. Still to be found?..

There were numerous roosters through the grounds in many different corners, many with their own scintillating colors that recalled precious stones and metals. Long entrapment seemed to have muted the majority. Man shook his head, chin wobbling.

– *Tidak* huh. No more... Maybe shush-shush perhaps, on the quiet? Signing crossing of the lips.

Laughing the fellow came clean.

– *Ya, ya*.

The old fighting contests with the associated gambling had not been stamped out entirely.

But *polisi, polisi*, huh? Gotta be careful...Keep a step ahead of the blue-boys.

Even in the big cities the cock-fighting persisted.

Ducks, turkeys and some other fly-ins got a large, high enclosure with a tree and pond. A second such held a giant coiled snake whose skin was recognizable from expensive fashion leather advertisements—pregnant it turned out.

Someone said this enemy of man there was from Kalimantan. The male partner lay just below water-level in an adjacent pond almost invisible. Three or four chickens these snakes consumed a number of times a week, when rats or mice had been the guess. The pair of snakes had been fifteen years at the market, the adjacent stall-keeper informed.

At one point earlier in the morning a woman startled when she was seen feeding a child from a packet of *KFC*.

Yogyakarta, Indonesia



Australian by birth and of Montenegrin origin, **Pavle Radonic**'s six years living and writing in S-E Asia has provided unexpected stimulus. Previous work has appeared in a range of literary journals and magazines, most recently *Ambit*, *Big Bridge*, *Antigonish* & *Citron Reviews*.

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