

How Java Got Its Mountains (and Stopped Wobbling)

by George Quinn

Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are almost everyday events in Java, but apparently the island used to be even shakier than it is now. According to the *Tantu Panggelaran*, a book written in fifteenth century Majapait (though probably not in court circles), at the beginning of history Java was flat. Because it had no mountains to weigh it down it developed a wobble. This alarmed the great god Guru, also known as Shiwa, who summoned all the gods and other denizens of heaven. He commanded them to go to India (called Jambudwipa in the *Tantu Panggelaran*), remove the great and holy Mount Meru and transport it back to Java. Shifting Mount Meru to Java, the god reasoned, would cure the island of its shakes.

Humour in dead languages almost always evaporates in the arid air of scholarship, but in the Old Javanese *Tantu Panggelaran* somehow a cackle of ancient laughter has survived. Across the gulf of time and the deadening process of editing that has brought the book into the 21st century there is something endearing about the incompetence of Java's gods as they bust apart Mount Meru and lug part of it back to Java.

The gods had problems rolling the mountain along and they became thirsty. Water was gushing out of the mountain but it was the deadly water of Kalakutha. The gods were so thirsty that they drank it anyway, and they all keeled over, dead.

After trying the water himself and almost poisoning himself, Guru restores the gods to life, but he is exasperated with them.

“Now get that mountain moving! C'mon, get going you kids! Take it to Java!”

The gods arrive at Java – with some relief, you sense – and put the mountain down at the western end. But like the end of a giant see-saw the west sinks under the mountain's weight and the eastern end of the island rears up. The gods scramble to correct their error but manage only to make matters worse.

The gods broke off the top half of the mountain and moved it east, leaving behind a stump of mountain in the west. As they rolled the mountain along bits and pieces began to fall off. The first piece to fall to the ground became Mount Katong, the second piece Mount Wilis, a third piece hit the ground and became Mount Kampud, the fourth piece to fall became Mount Kawi, the fifth became Mount Arjuna, and the sixth piece became Mount Kemukus.¹ So many pieces fell off Mount Mahameru that the underside became all hollowed out and the mountain tilted over to the north. The summit cracked and fell off, but the gods picked it up and stuck it back on again. “There... as good as new,” they said. [...] But so much had been lost from the underside of the

¹ Today Mount Katong is known as Mount Lawu, Mount Kampud has become Mount Kelud, and Mount Kemukus is most likely the modern Mount Semeru in East Java. The other names mentioned have remained unchanged over the centuries.

mountain that it could no longer stand solidly upright. The gods had to lean it against Mount Bromo otherwise the great mountain would have toppled over.²

With mountains positioned like paperweights along its length, Java stopped shaking. At least that is what the *Tantu Panggelaran* claims. But tradition has it that the gods, perhaps noticing that their bumbling handiwork hadn't wholly solved the earthquake problem, took a giant nail and drove it through the centre of the island. It is the head of this nail that today is the neatly hemispherical hill some 300 metres in height called Mount Tidar in the southern suburbs of Magelang, Central Java.

² In the modern Javanese *Serat Kandhaning Ringgit Purwa*, written some time in the 18th century, the same story is told. The gods are no less clownish despite the half-hearted attempt by the book's authors to add an Islamic veneer to events.