

## BIRDS BETWEEN SCIENCE AND CULTURE

Dennys Pradita, *Science vs Mythology: Introduction and Classification from Perspective of Local Communities and Ornithologist*

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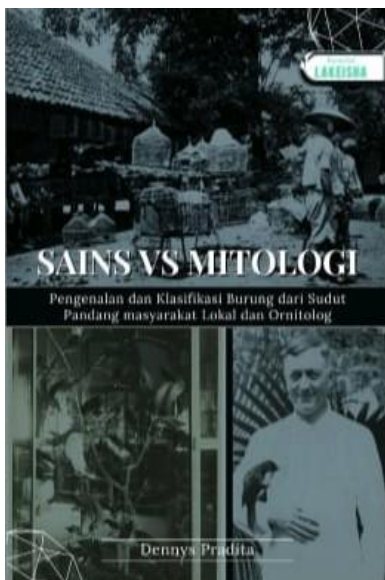
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### BOOK REVIEW

DENNYS PRADITA, *Science vs Mythology: Introduction and Classification from Perspective of Local Communities and Ornithologist*. KLATEN: LAKEISHA, 2021, 114+XVI PAGE. ISBN: 978 623 5536 88 0. PRICE: Rp.39000 (EBOOK)

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Aves or birds, are a group of animals characterized by a beak and feathered bodies. The forelimb of the bird, called wings, is specialized for flying. There are at least 10,000 species of birds in the world, with more than 1,800 species in Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> The interaction between birds and humans has been going on since the beginning of civilization. This interaction has given rise to many inspirations for human life, from myths, folklore, art, to the realm of science and technology. For many scientists, birds are unique objects that portray the exoticism of a region. Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) voyage with the HMS Beagle to the Galapagos islands in 1831-1836 is an example of how his research on finches influenced the development of science through the theory of evolution.

<sup>1</sup> Junaid, Achmad Ridha, and Jihad, "Status Burung Di Indonesia 2024," *Burung Indonesia*, 2024 <<https://www.burung.org/status-burung-di-indonesia-2024>> [accessed 20 September 2024]

On the other side of the world, infamous naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823 - 1913) also introduced various species of birds new to science through his Journey to Indonesia, that documented in his book, *The Malay Archipelago* (1869). Question then arises, if science holds birds in high regard, how about the views of the people who live in the areas where these birds live, especially in Indonesia?

This book attempts to compare how people view birds from two different perspectives: the scientists, including Western naturalists, and the local communities of Indonesia. The book uses historical and sociological approaches in observing the object. Based on its main theme, this book can be categorized as environmental history. Although many foreign historians have already discussed it, ironically, there are only a few local historians who work on this subject<sup>2</sup>. Some works by local historians, such as *Tantangan industrialisasi Madura: membentur kultur, menjunjung leluhur* (English: *The challenge of Madura's industrialization: hitting culture, upholding ancestors*) (2004) by Andang Subahianto are well known, but there is far less local history literature that discusses animal and human interactions in Indonesia. On the other hand, Indonesia is a region with rich biodiversity and its natural history. The information about environmental history can be a reflection for the Indonesian people, especially the policymakers, so that the vision of sustainable development can be realized. This book could be a reference that adds knowledge about the environmental history from a local historian. Review and criticism of these works are expected to give suggestion for the academics that interested in the development of environmental and natural history studies.

The book consists of five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, which discusses the author's key reasons for exploring the study object. The main reason is that over the centuries, birds have attracted many people, both locally with mythology and various local beliefs, and internationally with their scientific approach<sup>3</sup>. These two different perspectives are interesting to study because each perspective has implications for the conservation of birds in nature. This chapter also discusses the methodology used in writing the book. The author believes that bird research has always been conducted in two separate approaches, the scientific approach and the cultural approach. The author then tries to combine these two approaches in one book so that readers can directly see the differences between the two approaches more comprehensively. By combining these two approaches, the author can clearly show the differentiation between the two perspectives on viewing the birds as the study object. The most important thing in this chapter is that the author limits the historical study in this book to the 1970s. This is unfortunate because the reader could have seen the changes in both perspectives when environmental protection became more popular after the 1970s, since the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm.

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmad, Tsabit Azinar, "Pembelajaran Sejarah Berwawasan Lingkungan," *Indonesian Journal of Conservation*, 2.1 (2013), pp. 74–83.

<sup>3</sup> Pradita, Dennys, *Science vs Mythology: Bird Recognition and Classification from the Perspective of Local Communities and Ornithologists* (Klaten: Lakeisha, 2021), p. 3.

The second chapter discusses the diversity and distribution of birds in Indonesia based on various historical sources, mainly by Western naturalists. In addition, there are also local sources that slightly describe the diversity of birds in Indonesia. These historical sources are certainly important for the readers, because in addition to knowing how rich bird diversity in Indonesia has been since ancient times, readers can also find out how much diversity has disappeared from various regions. That information provides a reflection material to foster environmental awareness. Even so, the use of bird species and names in this book should be adjusted to the latest taxonomical nomenclature so that readers are not confused if they want to double-check the bird species contained in the book, considering that there have been several taxonomic changes since the 20th century.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the core chapters of this book. Chapter 3 specifically discusses the historical journey of foreign explorers and scientists in uncovering the diversity of the birds of the Indonesian archipelago, starting from the age of exploration until the 1970s. When compared to chapter 4, there is an impression that chapter 3 seems to be less detailed, but this is understandable given that historical sources derived from natural research before the 19th century were dominated by only a few specific naturalists. There is an interesting statement that as time progressed, the idea of birds, which was originally just an icon of the exoticism of the archipelago, turned into a precursor to the emergence of environmental awareness, especially after the establishment of the *Nederlandsch Indische Vereeniging tot Natuurbescherming* in 1912<sup>4</sup>. Although the author has mentioned details about the formation of the organization in a different book, it would have been better if the author could have explained the events that led up to its founding in a little more detail. This would have made this chapter more interesting in explaining the changes in thinking that occurred in the scientific world.

Chapter 4 discusses the various forms of thought of Indonesian local communities and their interactions with birds. The author describes various local thoughts and cultures towards birds, starting from the western part to the eastern part of Indonesia<sup>5</sup>. In general, local people's thoughts on birds are varied in various regions and tend to be static and without significant changes. Based on the thinking of local communities, birds can be considered a sign of blessings or disasters. This thinking can strengthen or eliminate the tradition of hunting certain species, thus encouraging the extinction or the existence of a bird species in the area.

Although it tends to be static, the author also gives examples of how acculturation can sometimes influence local people's thinking<sup>6</sup>. One example mentioned was the increase in hornbill hunting in Kalimantan due to demand from the Chinese empire, even though the bird was originally sacred. However, the author does not explain how Western scientific thinking influences the perception of local communities. This is quite unfortunate considering that in historical records,

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<sup>4</sup> Pradita, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Pradita, pp. 66-67.

<sup>6</sup> Pradita, p. 97.

intersections between two cultures are very likely to occur, for example, the interaction between Alfred Russel Wallace and Ali in his book "*The Malay Archipelago*"<sup>7</sup>. If the interaction has no historical evidence or does not exist at all, the author should just mention it. Readers would expect to see an interaction between these two ideas based on the title of the book.

The last chapter is a brief conclusion of the changes in the identification and meaning of birds in general. Local communities initially interpreted birds as signs of nature and identified them based on local languages. Then the West came with its scientific method. With this method, identification became more detailed, giving birth to various scientific studies. Through trade networks and publications, western scientific thinking eventually dominated the hegemony of local knowledge from a global perspective in interpreting birds. However, local people's ideas may be important to science because of their deep history of interaction with birds in their region.

Overall, this work is important for the development of the study of history, culture, and ornithology because the author can bring readers to see birds from a rarely observed perspective, the historical and cultural perspective. Although there are some shortcomings in this book. Aside from some of the previously mentioned aspects, some technical flaws that annoyed the reader's experience. The main flaw is in the official digital version on *Google Play*. The indexing of pages and subchapters is not well organized. This confuses the readers who want to use the book as a reference. Another drawback is that the use of the "search" feature in this version does not display search results correctly, even though the searched word is within the book. Despite these shortcomings, this book is highly recommended for historians and ornithologists who want to add new insights and perspectives.

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<sup>7</sup> A detailed summary of the interaction between Alfred Russel Wallace and Ali can be found in Sochaczewski, Paul Spencer, "*Look Here, Sir, What a Curious Bird*": Searching for Ali, Alfred Russel Wallace's Faithful Companion (Geneva: Explorer's Eye Press, 2023), pp. 21-41.

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