



## Pigeon and Friarbird Revisited

### A Further Analysis of an Eastern Indonesian Mythico-Ornithological Contrast

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**Abstract.** – An earlier analysis of eastern Indonesian myths concerning the origin of death and the origin of temporal alternation (Forth 1992) has subsequently been informed and substantially augmented by more recent research into the folk ornithology of birds that figure as the myths' central characters. In this further exploration of the tradition, it is shown how contrasting qualities especially of bird vocalizations crucially influence a series of conceptual oppositions linked with the avian characters. Attention is also given to the part played by morphological and behavioural features of the ornithological species, and the extent to which these cohere with vocalic differences between the same bird kinds. The general objective is a demonstration of the importance of percepts in eastern Indonesian bird symbolism, and of how empirical features of natural kinds can influence their mythological value to an extent comparable to their formative role in shaping ethnozoological taxonomies. [*Eastern Indonesian mythology, origin of death myths, folk ornithology, symbolism of birds, empirical sources of animal symbols*]

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Some fifteen years ago I published a comparative essay on eastern Indonesian myths of origin which portray birds as opponents in an oratorical competition that determines the present order of the world (Forth 1992). Since then, ethnographic investigations by the present author as well as two articles by David Hicks (1997, 2006; see also Hicks 2004) have provided additional insight into the narrative

tradition and the ornithological kinds which inform its central characters. Identification of the species involved has been greatly facilitated by the publication of an authoritative guide to the birds of Wallacea by Coates and Bishop (1997). At the same time, further investigation of the folk ornithology of the Nage of central Flores, including the occurrence of birds in various contexts of Nage oral culture (Forth 1996, 1999, 2004), has allowed a broader consideration of the use of birds in a variety of symbolic and mythological genres. In view of these developments, a comprehensive comparative review of the mythical tradition and the way it illuminates issues of eastern Indonesian symbolism and cosmology is warranted. In a more general vein, a major aim of this essay is a further demonstration of the empirical grounding of symbolic values in attested vocal and visual features of natural species (cf. Berlin 2006).

I first came to the present topic by way of a Nage story concerning the origin of the temporal alternation of night and day and the origin of death. Both origins are represented as the outcome of a contest between the Helmeted friarbird (*Philemon buceroides*; see Fig. 1) and the Green imperial pigeon (*Ducula aenea*; see Fig. 2). The friarbird, moreover, appears as one contestant in variants of the myth found in other parts of Flores, on Sumba, and also on Timor. The identity of the bird's avifaunal opponent is somewhat various, but is represented by some kind of pigeon on all three of these islands. In a way consistent with the bird's persistent early morning vocalizations heralding the start of a new