

Who Are the Kalang?

An Unknown Minority Group on Java and Their So-Called Myth of Origin

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Abstract. – Friedrich Seltmann's monograph about the Kalang, which appeared in 1987, has been acclaimed as an invaluable handbook on the subject. Close reading, however, reveals that it is anything but reliable. Seltmann's book merely presents the negative Javanese imagery of the Kalang, whereas the Kalang themselves remain in the dark. In the article three important sections of Seltmann's work are discussed: (1) the history of the Kalang, (2) the Kalang death ritual, and (3) the Kalang myth of origin. It is argued that the reason that the Kalang became a low-status group in Javanese society probably had to do with their association with the forest. Initially, the so-called myth of origin of the Kalang, in which they are presented as descendants of a woman and a (were-)dog, was a Javanese explanation for the inferior position of the Kalang as wandering woodsmen. In a later period, when the Kalang emerged as (wealthy) businessmen, this myth of origin could make it plain to the Javanese what the reason of the Kalang's economical success was. [*Java, Kalang, myth of origin, peripatetic minorities, forest*]

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Who are the Kalang? In the past the Kalang are said to have led a wandering life in the forests of Java until Sultan Agung (r. 1613-1645) forced them to settle down at permanent places. They worked as hunters, carpenters, house-builders, cartwrights, drivers, merchants, etc. (Anonymous 1918: 254-255). Nominally Muslim, they worshipped a red dog as their totem (Thomas 1964: 512b; Wheeler Robinson 1964: 792a). Not very much more is known about them, apart from the fact that they were held in contempt by the surrounding population. As Thomas Stamford Raffles noted in his "History of Java" (1817), the word Kalang was among Javanese an "epithet of reproach and disgrace" (Raffles 1965: 328).

This, then, is basically the picture which is drawn in the older literature. For more information we can recently turn to Friedrich Seltmann's

monograph "Die Kalang. Eine Volksgruppe auf Java und ihre Stamm-Mythe. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte Javas" (The Kalang. An Ethnic Group on Java and Its Myth of Origin. A Contribution to Javanese Cultural History), which appeared in 1987. This book is both rewarding and frustrating. It is rewarding, because Seltmann has assembled an impressive amount of scattered information on a lesser known group of people in Java. For this reason it has been praised by reviewers and even been acclaimed as "the authoritative handbook on the subject" (Ras 1987a: 590).¹ On the other hand, however, it is frustrating, because after reading Seltmann's book, it is still unclear who the Kalang actually are.

Thomas Schweizer (1990: 350), one of the book reviewers, has called Seltmann's approach philological and historical, reminiscent of Dutch "Javanology" and "Indology." Seltmann's book, which, by the way, is dedicated to two of his teachers, C. Hooykaas and Th. G. Th. Pigeaud, two of the most prominent representatives of the Leiden School of Philology, indeed contains both the strong and the weak points of the older "Dutch Javanology/Indology." On the one hand products of this school are solid in the sense that all available material is recorded with much attention to detail. On the other hand they are rather disappointing, because interpretive perspectives and theoretical bases are often lacking. A distinctive feature of the Leiden School of Philology was its search for hypothetical "original" texts and "best readings." In Seltmann's book we likewise encounter an obsession with reconstruction, culminating in the lengthy 6th chapter (169-277) where he tries to discover the "prototype" of the Kalang myth of origin by comparing no less than 48 versions.

¹ Unlike Ras (1987a), who is full of praise, the reviews of Wolfgang Marschall (1990) and of Thomas Schweizer (1990) are of a more critical nature and also point out some weaknesses in Seltmann's work.