

SI MEUSEUKIN'S WEDDING*

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The following story is translated from a text originally recorded by Snouck Hurgronje's secretary Teungkoe Noerdin and published by Raden Dr. Hoesein Djajadiningrat under the title "Vier Atjesche si Meuseukin-vertellingen."¹ Djajadiningrat only translated three stories, however, omitting this one on the grounds that it was too indelicate. The story is referred to by Snouck Hurgronje as "a disgusting tale, though only moderately so if measured by the standard of the Sundanese Kabayan stories."² Snouck remarks that there are three versions of this tale in Sundanese.

Si Gasiën-meuseukin (Si Poor-and-Destitute) is a standard figure in Indonesian literatures. In the Atjehnese stories, however, he is not so much a character as a rubric; his characteristics vary from tale to tale. For instance, though he is referred to as lazy and stupid, he often appears ambitious and clever. Other Atjehnese Si Meuseukin tales are summarized by Snouck.

There was a destitute man; he had nothing at all.³ The people of the village had pity and married him off to the daughter of someone, to a poor girl who hadn't a thing to her name. This Si Gasiën-meuseukin was lazy and indolent; moreover, he was particularly stupid. He was escorted to the house of the woman [his bride] where there was a large feast. A great many people went along with him to the bride's house.⁴

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¹*Tijdschrift van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen*, LVII, 4 (1916), pp. 273-403.

²*The Achehnese* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1906), II, p. 72.

³The following paragraphs stand at the head of the text. The first is a title, probably supplied by Teungkoe Noerdin. The second verse, according to Djajadiningrat may have been recited merely as a means of indicating the story was to begin. It is my guess that it too was supplied by Teungkoe Noerdin:

The story of Si Gasiën-meuseukin married to a poor woman. Si Gasiën-meuseukin eats nangka fruit and shits, diarrheically, into his mother-in-law's face.

Hiem-heb, a *kaj* of rice, the pot of full, though the people who said it may be wrong, I, who put it all together, am without fault.

⁴In Atjehnese marriages, the bridegroom is brought to the house of his bride, often in another village, by the men and boys of his own village. The men of his party are then given a feast.

They were brought right into the house where the bride served them trays of food. After the rice, a *angka*⁵ was brought out. The grandmother *peungandjō*⁶ said, "Haj, groom, have you got room left to eat some *angka*?"

Si Meuseukin said, "I don't eat it. In our village that sort of fruit just rots; no one bothers to eat it; it's just thrown out and rolls around under the trees."

Afterwards, in the middle of the night, when it was quiet, when all the people and all the guests were asleep, Si Meuseukin gradually awoke as he sniffed the exciting odor of the *angka*. He said, "Really delicious (*mangat*)! Where is it coming from? I have a great yen for it! Suppose I go look for it now before anyone knows." He got up and felt around in the pitch darkness. All night long he kept groping here and there. As soon as he found the *angka*, which had been put in a covered tray, he bolted it down--all the flesh, the whole core and all the seeds. He swallowed it all down along with the skin.

By the will of God, Si Meuseukin was sick to his stomach that night.⁷ He held it in and held it in, but he couldn't hold it in; he held it back and held it back, but he couldn't hold it back any longer. Then out came the diarrhetic shit⁸ with a row of farts. As soon as he had farted, he stripped off his pants and took off all the rest of his clothes. Then he gathered up everyone else's clothes (they were asleep), rolled them all up, and wiped his behind with them. He wiped and wiped till he couldn't wipe any longer, and then diarrhetic shit came out again. Why wouldn't he continue to shit?--he had eaten a whole great *angka* as big as a water barrel. He stopped up his anus with the clothes of the guests, who were sleeping there. [But] he couldn't hold it back any longer and he took out the stopper. As he took it out, out came the shit again with a salvo of plops and a *tab-toeb* [onomatopoeic] as the *angka* seeds were strewn every which way against the palm-leaf walls of the entire house.

The guests who had been sleeping woke up. All were naked, without clothes. They looked everywhere for their clothes without finding them. They felt about this way and that way and then came across a heap of wet clothes. They said, "Why in the world are these clothes wet and all heaped in a bundle?" As soon as they sniffed, they said more: "Eh, misery! Why do these clothes stink of shit? Who in the world has dysentery here in the dark?" By that time they were all screaming, even the grandmother *peungandjō*, and cursing.

⁵*Angka*, the Malay for the Atjehnese *panaīh*, is a large fruit, often about two feet long when ripe. It has smooth yellowish pits covered with flesh set into a web-like core, the whole being wrapped in a thick, uneven skin. It has a nutty flavor and a perceptible odor.

⁶The grandmother *peungandjō* is an old woman who "stands by the bride through the ceremonies." Djajadiningrat, *Atjehsch-Nederlandsch Woordenboek*, under *peungandjō*

⁷The Atjehnese term, "sick to one's stomach," means both sick in our sense and also that one has to defecate.

⁸Atjehnese do not have formal and colloquial terms for faeces. I have therefore retained our colloquial terms as closer to the mood of the story.

Si Meuseukin went straight up to the attic and got a ball of kite string which he stuffed right into his anus. He let the end of the string hang down onto the top of his mother-in-law's sleeping place. Her daughter, sister of the bride, said, "Haj mother, what's this water dripping? Maybe it's the shit of a miserable mouse who is shitting onto the mosquito net." As soon as she sniffed, she got the odor of shit and then said, "Oh misery! Who is shitting, drop by drop onto the net?"

Si Meuseukin's mother-in-law got up and saw the string dangling onto the sleeping place. As soon as she pulled it, out came the stopper from the bridegroom's anus and out spouted the shit of Si Meuseukin, squirting all over his mother-in-law's face. After the shit had been smeared all over her face, she began cursing intently in the pitch darkness. "Haj, may you be stabbed, impaled, die chopped to bits, may the waves carry you off, may a crocodile tear you to bits!"

Si Meuseukin laughed, "I didn't mean it; I didn't know you slept there, *tuan* mother-in-law."

When she heard this, she began cursing even more than before, "Haj, may you be impaled, ripped open by an elephant, may a tiger crunch you up, a rhinoceros trample on you, a shark carry you off, a whale tear you to bits, haj, gallows-bird, may a bullet carry you off, a cannon wipe you out, a plague do you in, the cholera snatch you away. What's not right, you think right; what's not proper you make look proper; haj accursed, may the *djinn* sit on your chest and bring you nightmares. Why did you shit in the house?"

Si Meuseukin answered, "I was sick to my stomach, haj mother-in-law."

His mother-in-law said, "What did you stuff yourself with that made you sick to your stomach?"

Si Meuseukin answered, "It was *nangka* that I ate."

His mother-in-law said, "Just now when the *peungandjō* told you to have some, why didn't you want to eat it?"

As soon as his mother-in-law went to look at the *nangka* she saw that there was none left, that he had eaten a whole one. His mother-in-law said, "How wouldn't you be sick to your stomach, oh may-you-be-stabbed-to-death! Why did you eat it all, all the flesh, all the core, all the seeds, and even all the skin? How wouldn't you be sick to your stomach, finishing off a whole one, gobbling it down! Why didn't you go outside, oh gallows-bird?"

Si Meuseukin answered, "I didn't know where the door was, oh *tuan* mother-in-law, that was the reason. I groped around and came finally to this attic as I didn't know one place from another in this absolute pitch blackness."

When the guests heard [the noise], they all woke up and each of them got up to look for his clothes. None of them had their own clothes any longer, and they exchanged them all around. Meanwhile the smell of shit permeated the whole house and there was a great uproar.

This woman said, "That's my sarong!" And that woman said, "Where did you get my sarong?" When they smelled them, their faces were smeared all over with shit and they said, "Haj gallows-bird, why did you smear shit on me?"

Then they answered, "Who smeared shit on you, accursed dog?" They roused each other to anger in the pitch darkness and began a huge quarrel; they seized each other and shook each other throughout the house; small children had their bones broken and there was great confusion throughout the village.

Because Si Meuseukin had dysentery, all the people there quarreled, men and women striking out in every direction. That night some got broken bones and some were lamed as they were trampled or seized. They all went back to their own homes. In the morning Si Meuseukin too went home to his own village.

The comedy of this story can obscure its anomalous feature as narrative. For if we call this story a folktale we see that it begins where most folktales end--with the fulfillment of a wish. A poor man obtains what he otherwise could not--a wife. As a story it lacks narrative coherence. It begins with the arrangements for a marriage; however, it is not really possible to say if these arrangements are successful. We know nothing about the fate of the couple. One might assume that the marriage ended before it was consummated. But one cannot be sure of that, for in traditional Atjehnese weddings the groom would spend several nights at the bride's house, returning to his own village each morning before coming to live with his wife. In any case, we are certainly not told that the couple lived happily ever after.

Listening to the story we are not likely to wonder what happened to the characters. Our attention has been so diverted we do not notice that the topic of the story--the marriage--has been left unresolved. That we are not concerned with the lack of resolution indicates the presence of another kind of rhetoric on which I want to focus attention.

The story is about the darkness-which-causes-confusion. Identities are lost: Si Meuseukin shits on his mother-in-law because, as he says, "I didn't know you were there." People accuse each other rather than Si Meuseukin of having played the trick of shitting on their clothes. At one point it is thought it is a mouse that is shitting. In response to his mother-in-law, Si Meuseukin claims that he did not shit outside because "I did not know where the door was, oh tuan mother-in-law, that's the reason. I groped around and came finally to this attic as I did not know one place from another in this absolute pitch darkness." The darkness of that night was so intense, in fact, that if we are to believe him Si Meuseukin did not know up from down, ending up in the attic when he was trying to go down the stairs to the outdoors.

A clue to the nature of this darkness is to be found in the mother-in-law's accusation that "What's not right you think right; what's not proper you make look proper" which recalls a similar passage in the *Hikajat Pötjoet Moehamat* (and is very likely a quotation

from one version of it). Keutjhi' Moeda Sa'ti, one of the characters, is accused of setting two sides against each other in these lines:

What's not seemly, you make (look) seeming; spotted hands
you cover with henna.
What's not becoming, you make (look) becoming; gleaming
teeth you cover with soot.
What's not proper, you make (look) proper; dropsied
feet you cover with bells.⁹

Hearing, "What's not proper you make look proper," in our story, Atjehnese may well have filled in "dropsied feet you cover with bells" as well as remembering the preceding lines.

Si Meuseukin as a bridegroom is someone who, like Keutjhi' Moeda Sa'ti, belongs equally to two sides--to his own village and that into which he marries. And, like the Keutjhi' [headman], Si Meuseukin sets two sides fighting. It is not an exaggeration to think of the two parties to a wedding as being on opposite sides. Snouck describes the contests between the bride's and the groom's villages. Weddings themselves are still nearly always the scenes of quarrels between the two parties.

Keutjhi' Moeda Sa'ti was also accused of "having a lot of talk, more consultation, and very much deliberation." No such accusation is made against Si Meuseukin, but it is implicit in the story itself. There is an Atjehnese idiom, *tjang panañh* meaning "to mince nangka" but also "to brag, to talk hot air, to talk rubbish and to chat."¹⁰ The story spells out the idiom. Si Meuseukin's eating of the nangka, including the rind and the seeds, is nothing less than the mincing of the nangka, just as his answer to the offer of the nangka is not a simple "no," but rather a boast, a speech in which words are elaborated beyond the way things actually are. The transformation of nangka into explosive shit, a marvelous image of boasting, is thus an imagining of words as agents of obscurity and confusion as they lead nowhere, just as idle chatter--gossip and boasting--mean little.

Claiming that the story is about words as shit may seem too literary and esoteric to be reasonably expected of a folktale. To think that words are shit, however, in the context of Atjehnese notions of self and society is simply to stabilize one's investment in social order. It is an idea that was no doubt generated out of a sense of the discontinuity of one's own mental processes and the meanings that regulate social life. In this sense it is a self-correction by which people are brought back to conventional meanings as their own imaginings begin to take hold.

Looking now at the literary features of the story, we seem at first to find confirmation of our reading. What we see is an attempt

⁹Lines 262-64 of the *Hikajat Pðtjoet Moehamat*, romanized by Damsté, to be found in the University at Leiden, Cod. Or. 8669d.

¹⁰The idiom is to be found in Djajadiningrat, under *panañh*. The central importance of the nangka can be seen from the fact that the only question that we can be sure is answered truthfully is "What did you stuff yourself with that made you sick to your stomach?"--the answer being nangka.

to isolate words from their context so that they lose their sense. The speeches of the characters of the story are one illustration. Most of their utterances are questions, but, aside from the offering of the *ngangka*, there are only two questions that are actually answered--and these give us the information I mentioned earlier. When the mother-in-law asks why Si Meuseukin shat in the house, he says that he was sick to his stomach. But when she asks why he ate the whole *ngangka*, there is no reply. When the guests awake and look for their clothes, they first ask, "Why are these clothes wet and heaped in a bundle?" This is followed not by an answer but by another question--"Why do these clothes stink of shit?" The answers that we do get are divorced from the queries. At most they profess ignorance, as when Si Meuseukin says he did not know where the door was, or they are not replies to what was asked at all, as when the mother-in-law, having been shat on, curses, and Si Meuseukin says that he did not mean it, that he did not know she slept there. Most of the speeches, then, are not part of an exchange of words at all; those that are not questions are mostly expletives and curses or merely expressions, as when Si Meuseukin smells the *ngangka* and says, to no one at all, "Really delicious. Where is it coming from? I have a great yen for it. Suppose I go and look for it now before anyone knows." This is too explicit an utterance to be construed as talking to oneself. One could of course say that he is speaking to the listener. But to have his intentions put into his own voice in order to speak to us simply isolates the voice from the story.

The effect of the curses and the questions without reply is that they are lifted out of the context of narrative exchange. The voices of the protagonists become not clues to their character, but a means of raising words out of the flow of social interaction. When we hear the mother-in-law's long string of curses, the line of expletives is so extended that we lose sight of its anchoring in her, just as we cannot really think of a person being responsible for all that shit. Words have no direction. The guest's accusations are shouted into darkness though we know them to be instigated by Si Meuseukin. The result is an exchange at the level of rhetoric alone as speech is exchanged not for speech, but, we can see, for shit.

Aside from Si Meuseukin, the characters speak in a common tone--outrage. Indeed, they often speak out of a common identity, being labeled only as "guests" rather than as individuals. This commonality of tone, the shared outrage of the characters, is played off against the neutrality of the narrative voice. We are given nothing of the way the marriage worked out; we do not even see the bride. The narrator does not align himself with the outrage of those shat upon, nor does he express himself on the fate of Si Meuseukin. In the end we are told only that Si Meuseukin, along with others, goes home. There is neither regret shown for an opportunity that was, possibly, lost, nor commendation for the charitable act of the marriage arrangement. The effect of this neutrality is to allow the story to confine itself simply to events as they occur rather than events set in the context of raised expectations. The coolness of tone allows us to see what occurs without having to synthesize them in terms of character or moral significance. The freeing of events from a moral framework, from one which depends on the probability of character, from investment in the fate of Si Meuseukin, is another means of letting words flow by themselves. The quick pace of the action comes about because the tone of noncommitment indicates that we need not be concerned with judgments

of morality or probability. We are not slowed down by having to refer these words back to the narrator, back to the characters or back to a social context.¹¹

The scenes of violent shitting should be thought of in the same way. They are scenes so vivid and dramatic in themselves that they obscure expectations about the marriage. Once these scenes begin, it no longer matters that the setting is a wedding party.

If we take another tack now and think again of the *ngangka* we are led to an association of the *ngangka* and women. There is an Atjehnese saying, for instance: "A *ngangka* with soft flesh served on a tray. Wherever I taste it, it is flaccid. Give me back the money I forked over."¹² And the riddle:

Fringed, fringed¹³
 Within the fringes is the flesh.¹⁴
 The bladder¹⁵ is an oil container.
 Within the bladder are the seeds.¹⁶

The answer being "*ngangka*." This association is strengthened by the word for sexual intercourse in Atjehnese which also means "eat."

To pursue this identification, however, leads to confusion. For one thing, Si Meuseukin becomes like the *ngangka* and thus female--a swollen bladder, full of exaggerations and containing seeds. In the scene of the spewing of the seeds against the wall of the house, though, the seeds exit from the wrong end, for he is male. The story, rather than carrying the identification forward, reverses it to leave us in confusion.

The inability to identify is, of course, what darkness is about. Each time an identification is about to be made, the identifier gets it in the face. For instance, after her daughter asks "Who is shitting, drop by drop, onto the net?" the mother-in-law pulls the string. The guests try to identify their clothes: "This woman said, 'That's my sarong' and that woman said, 'Where did you get my sarong?' When they smelled them their faces were smeared all over with shit. . . ."

Whereas tracing the sexual meanings of *panaīh* or *ngangka* leads to confusion, we see that this is just what is called for when the meanings

¹¹It is true that Si Meuseukin is described as lazy and stupid. But the labeling of Si Meuseukin is a rhetorical formula used in other Si Meuseukin stories. That it is contradicted by the content of the story again calls attention to rhetoric, divorcing rhetoric and content, and making the narrative voice responsible only for the words spoken, not for their content.

¹²Quoted in Djajadiningrat under *boebō*.

¹³The same word means "hair."

¹⁴Flesh of animals, humans, or fruit.

¹⁵A word meaning also "fleece," "to swell or expand," "to exaggerate." As "bladder" it is both bladder generically and the urinary bladder.

¹⁶The same word means "child." The riddle is to be found in J. Kreemer, "Atjehsche Raadsels," *Mededeeling IX, Koloniaal Instituut te Amsterdam, Afdeling Volkenkunde 3, Volkenkundige Opstellen II* (1928), p. 27.

of words have been obscured. It is for this reason that the other meaning of *panaĩh*, which is the Atjehnese for the Malay *panas* or "hot," is in fact exemplified in the story. *Panaĩh* means "to heat up," "to make trouble," "to upset," and "to bring misfortune" and is contrasted with *sidjoeë*' which means both "cool" and "to calm," "to make peace" and is the root of a word naming a ceremony which is used to calm and to ward off unholy influences.

The problem, however, is that the story is comical. One reading would be that the comedy of the tale rests on the outrage committed. The degradation of the mother-in-law and the guests as they are smeared with shit is what would be secretly desired. There are some difficulties, however. For one thing, we know nothing of the antecedents of the characters that would let us enjoy their comedown. There is not even a generalized feeling of poor against rich since we are told that the bride's family is as poor as Si Meuseukin. One could make a case that this is an expression of the hostility toward in-laws which was a feature of Atjehnese social life. However, the exception would be the poor because they would be less dependent on their in-laws. Moreover, the guests shat upon would-be members of the wedding party from Si Meuseukin's own village. The opposition one might expect between in-laws and son-in-law is thus obscured. Indeed, the lumping of the "guests" together in a single rubric, rather than identifying them as members of the groom's or bride's party, seems almost designed to confound an interpretation based on a war of in-laws.

A clue can be found in Si Meuseukin's laughter when he shits in his mother-in-law's face: "Si Meuseukin laughed. 'I didn't mean it; I didn't know you slept there, tuan mother-in-law.'" Though it was no accident as we have seen, we must believe that Si Meuseukin "did not mean it." His laughter comes, indeed, just from "not intending," from having given up the attempt to make language conform to meaning as is implied in the notion of *tjang panaĩh*, of boasting. His laughter images the general exuberance and energy that ensues and that is evident in the telling of the story. It is part of the fast pace possible when words are freed from their referents. What we see is best explained by the guests cursing each other when it was Si Meuseukin they should have been aiming it. Shit and words are exchanged only in the most general sense; really they are only set loose.

When Si Meuseukin "held it in and held it in, but . . . couldn't hold it in any longer" to set it loose comes as relief and excess. Si Meuseukin's laughter, indeed, is an expression of the excess and the relief that comes when one has given in to the running on of language without meaning. For words may be shit but shit, it turns out, is a pleasure. To call words shit may be to mark signifiers without signifieds as lies and deceit. But the formula is used here differently. For under its guise the neutrality of narrative tone, showing the disorder caused by empty words, reveals also the pleasure of lies and catastrophe.