

Indonesian Folktales

Retold by Murti Bunanta

Edited by Margaret Read MacDonald

World Folklore Series

Libraries Unlimited

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Reviewed by Jill Johnson



This book, the newest in a series of books published by the World Folklore Series, is a sprightly and informative introduction to the world of Indonesian folklore.

After a brief introduction to the land, history, religions and incredible cultural diversity (there are over 800 languages spoken in Indonesia!), the tales are divided into thematic sections: ex. jealous and envious brothers and sisters.

This is where I found my favorite tale: a Cinderella type story about a Youngest Sister married to a caterpillar (tattadu). Youngest Sister is taunted by her six older sisters until they discover that the tattadu is really a handsome young man! How Youngest Sister outwits her nasty siblings (and her husband!) while still retaining his love is a timeless story - with some wonderful Indonesian twists.

The section of stories about rice was particularly fascinating. There were five different stories about how rice came to a particular province or a region. These stories offered intriguing glances into the cultural imaginations and the actual practices of rice cultivation in the regions. In a story from Central Java Province, rice was originally only permitted to be cultivated in heaven by the gods. But a clever youth from Earth learns how to cultivate it from Dewri Sri, the goddess of rice, and then escapes with ripe rice stalks. There are some wonderfully subtle environmental messages in Dewri Sri's teachings and some gentle life lessons in how she deals with her cheeky apprentice. A wonderful – and informative story!

Anyone interested in world folklore who is not familiar with the Libraries Unlimited World Folklore Series should have a look. There are nineteen books with stories from cultures all over the world: Kenya, Nepal, the Ukraine, Finland, Korea, and Greece to name only a few. Some of the books present stories from our own American cultures: the Hispanic Southwest and the Pennsylvania Dutch. The editorial board of the World Folklore Series includes nationally known storytellers Norma Livo, Joseph Bruchac and our own Margaret Read MacDonald.