

JAVA,
ISLE OF VOLCANOES



The sawah rice-fields of Java



Mount Brohmo in eruption



Looking toward Mount Smeroe

THE FIRES OF SMEROE

By BRIGITTE REINDERS

A few weeks ago Smeroe, the most dangerous of Java's volcanoes, started erupting again. News dispatches carrying the story around the world also mentioned the ancient Javanese superstition connected with this volcano to the present day, according to which disobedience to the will of the god will lead to the breaking of the island in two.

Brigitte Reinders, who has made a special study of Javanese folklore, tells some of the legends of the volcano interwoven with a charming description of the Smeroe festival as it is still performed today.—K.M.

On the eve of the annual sacrificial feast of Smeroe, Madi and Atoen were celebrating their wedding. The moon stood over the ridge of the Tengger mountains. It shone upon the soft clouds of smoke rising towards the starry sky from the peaks of Smeroe and Brohmo. Its light spilled over their wild, rugged sides, reflected from the flooded rice-terraces, and crept over the gray stone figures of the temple. It penetrated the coconut forest surrounding the village, painted the bamboo huts a ghostly white, and came upon Madi and Atoen. There they sat among all the villagers, gathered for the wedding slamatan.

Together they had prayed and eaten and laughed. Together they now watched the shadow-play and listened to the accompanying words of the Dalang, the teller of stories. The melody of the gamelan followed the actions. As the story grew in excitement the chords of the orchestra became louder and louder and resolved themselves in a single tone when the voice of the Dalang died away. The Wayang puppets of the shadow-play disappeared into a large box, but the listeners sitting in a circle, and even Madi and Atoen, the bridal couple, begged the Dalang for more stories.

He came from a family of story-tellers. For generations the father had passed on to the son the treasure of his tales and legends, and now this Dalang was roaming the island of Java and telling the people the stories of

their country. He was rather tired today, for he had had a long journey. But he was poor, and Atoen's father was rich, and the Dalang needed money to make his own dreams come true. The teller of stories longed for concrete things—sawah rice-fields and many carabaos, the strong water buffaloes who would plough his plot of land.

But today he was still the story-teller. Today glowworms were flying through the night and getting caught in the blossoming hibiscus hedge surrounding the courtyard of the kampong. Today the wind was carrying waves of fragrance over the crowd of listeners. Atoen slowly raised her delicate head, stole a glance at Madi, and pulled her wedding sarong closer about her hips. Then her wide dark eyes looked up at the Dalang. He raised his hand, softly the gamelan music began, and he started his story:

"Long before the gods brought rice to our island, when the country of Java floated upon the sea as flat as a banana leaf, there ruled over the land the Princess Citra. She was so beautiful that in her presence the birds were silent, the flowers closed their petals, and the densest bamboo groves opened to clear the way for her. Yet as great as her beauty was her grief. She loved Prince Djamodjo, who lived on the other side of the island, and the Prince loved her. But the only link between the lovers was the course of the sun, which in the morning rose from the water where Citra stood,

and in the evening sank again where Djomodjo longingly watched it disappear. They could not marry, for remember, at that time Java was like a leaf floating on the water. Had the Prince with his large suite left his end of this leaf to visit Citra, the Princess with her whole court would have been drowned at the other end. Thus was Java in those days. And that was Citra's great grief.

In her despair she called upon the gods for help. They lived on high mountains in another country, but they knew of the yearning of these two lovers. And as Citra was so beautiful and so good, the god Brahma himself decided to help her. With the aid of Vishnu, the all-powerful one split off a part of the stony masses of the Himalayas and the mountain Mahameru. Brahma turned himself into a turtle, and with the load of mountains on his back he swam through the sea to the land of Citra and Djomodjo. Vishnu turned into a huge snake and wound himself around our island, holding it fast while the turtle set down its load in pieces all over Java. There was thunder and lightning. The earth groaned under its new burden. The waves of the sea grew higher, and Citra thought that the wrath of the gods was being poured forth over her and her land. But as it grew light there was a long chain of mountains stretching over the island. The water was quiet and the sky was clear. All that was left of the fearsome storm was the audible rumble and the thin wreath of smoke that came from the bowels of the mountains. It was thus that the gods came to Java, and from that day our island has lain firmly upon the water. Thus Citra and Djomodjo were made happy, and with them the people of Java."

The gamelan went on playing softly when the voice of the Dalang had died away. His eyes sought out Atoen. At the place where the girl had been sitting a few closed hibiscus blossoms lay on the ground, and Madi's place was empty. The listeners were sitting without a word. The rumbling of

Smeroe could be heard from the Tengger mountains. First it sounded like the last mutterings of a dying thunderstorm. But when the wind started to turn, the people were overwhelmed by the full thunder of its elemental force. The oil lamps flickered. The crowd moved closer together, while mothers put protecting arms around their children. The birds were startled in their nests and began chirping. Then it became quiet again. The music of the gamelan rose and the voice of the Dalang sounded across the courtyard:

"You people from the Tengger mountains, you have heard the call of Smeroe. Before you, your parents heard it, your grandparents and the people who lived long, long before them. Like you, they all tilled the land and planted the rice that Brahma sent to earth in the beak of a bird. At that time there lived, not far from your village here, the man Kai Kesomo with his wife Njai. They were poor people, and possessed only a small piece of sawah. Kai had to drag the plow with his own hands, he had no carabao that bathed in the evening after work in the kali flowing past his hut. Yet both were content—they had a hut, and a mat to sleep on. They worked together and prayed to Brahma for sun, rain, and wind for their rice. And together they cherished deep in their hearts the desire for a son.

But the course of the years had bent Kai's back and turned to silver the black hair of Njai. When Kai was dragging the heavy plow alone through the water-soaked earth, he often sighed for the strong arms of a son. And when Njai sat at the Wayang shadow-play, the only woman without a child, her eyes were sad. But they did not quarrel with their fate. Every morning, before the sun had fully risen, they both went out to their work, and in the evenings they sat in front of their hut and watched the fiery ball disappear behind the wall of the Tengger mountains.

On one such evening it happened that a tired old man came wandering through

the sawahs and begged Kai and Njai to give him shelter. Kindly the old couple took him in. Njai gave him some of her rice, while Kai opened the most tender coconut for his thirst and brought him the largest papaya growing on the tree before the hut. And when the stars came out they bedded him on their own mat and themselves lay down on the bare ground to sleep.

In the night they were awakened by an unusual light. It was not the sun which straightened out Kai's back and painted a rosy glow on Njai's cheeks. It was the shining figure of a god that seemed to extend the walls of the little hut.

"I am Brahma," he said, "come down to you from Smeroe. I have found you to be good, kind, and humble, in spite of the great sorrow in your hearts. Therefore your wish shall be granted. I, Brahma, will give you a son. He will bring you joy, happiness and wealth. But when he is grown up you will hear from me again and I will let you know how his future destiny shall be shaped according to my will." The light vanished, the mat was empty, and there was no one in the hut.

The rosy glow, however, had not disappeared from Njai's cheeks. And when the full moon stood in the sky for the ninth time, she gave Kai a son. They called him Pretoe. He was a beautiful child; his eyes shone with a light which made humans and animals willingly subordinate themselves to

him. He grew like a coconut palm, upright, slender and strong.

And when the child had grown into the boy Pretoe he stood beside his father in the water of the sawahs and plowed the earth. In all he did an invisible hand seemed to be guiding him. Everything he touched throve, nothing failed. The sawahs stood full with golden rice, the trees were heavy with fruit, and corn and sugar cane grew high. Kai became a rich man. Every evening a large herd of carabaos now bathed in the river, and his fields reached as far as the eye could see.

The boy Pretoe became a young man. His shoulders were wide and his hips narrow. His skin was like bronze. When he laughed his teeth shone like the white blossoms of the melati bush. The light that was in his face from the hour of his birth never left him. And ever since the girl Loromanis knew Pretoe, her face also

bore the reflection of this divine light. They loved each since that evening when, coming from the bathing place, they had followed the flight of the white cranes, and their shoulders had touched, as if compelled by a secret force. Now the girl's hair was adorned with yellow alamanda blossoms; soon her little head would be bowed under the marriage ornament.

The two young people were happy, and so was Kai Kesomo. But Njai lay at night on her mat and could not sleep. She was thinking of Brahma's



words, that Pretoe's destiny should be decided by the god alone. Although she had faith in Brahma and revered him, there was fear in her heart.

Then dark clouds began to gather over the summit of Smeroe. The heart of the mountain boiled and raged, and the earth trembled. In fear the people fell upon their knees. And on this very evening long ago, when the Waringin tree was struck by lightning, a messenger of Brahma appeared in the kampong of Kai Kesomo. Again that same light filled the room, again the voice of the god resounded:

"Parents of Pretoe, Brahma gave you a son to make you happy and rich, and this you have become. You, Kai, have the largest herd of carabaos and the most fertile sawahs. You, Njai, possess the most beautiful sarongs and the heaviest gold ornaments. Brahma demands that you give back your son. This very night he must climb Smeroe. At dawn Brahma himself will receive him in his arms at the bottom of the crater. But woe betide you if you do not obey his wish. A curse will strike the island, and in his wrath mighty Smeroe will tear the land in two."

The light vanished. Brahma's messenger was gone. The family awoke as from a terrible dream. Pale as death, Kai and Njai looked into each other's faces. The young lovers clung together desperately. But Brahma's will must be done, and Pretoe started on his way. With him went his old parents, and with him went the young Loromanis.

The mountain had ceased to rage. The earth lay quiet. The moon stood over the mountain ridge, as clear and shining as it is tonight. But it was not a wedding night in which its soft light kept watch. The parents and the lovers were dumb with grief. Only when they reached the rim of the crater and heard the hissing challenge of Smeroe did they fall on their knees and pray.

"O Brahma," cried the parents, "take our son, but take us too. What good is all our wealth without Pretoe, whose laughter is our sunshine?"

"Almighty One," said the girl softly, and the rumbling in the depths subsided, "Almighty One, take me too. Pretoe and I belong together, on the blossoming earth just as in your dark kingdom. We have come."

But suddenly Brahma's voice rang out: "My children, you have stood the test. Go and be happy. Continue to obey my commands and my blessing will be upon you. But if you should oppose my wishes the land will be struck by the curse of which my messenger warned you."

Pretoe and Loromanis became man and wife. Every year they made the same pilgrimage to the edge of Smeroe's crater and offered their sacrifices of rice and fruits. Their children and children's children did likewise, as we still do today. And Brahma's blessing lay over our island."

The stars were paling in the sky when the Dalang came to the end of his story. Day was dawning. The deep tone of the bedoek, the village drum, mingled with the music of the gamelan. It called and called. Now the orchestra was silent, and the listeners were torn out of their absorption. The bedoek boomed on through the night. It did not cease calling until the villagers had finally collected around the old Waringin tree. All the men and women of the village were there, only the Dalang and Atoen and Madi were missing. A procession was formed which wound its way up to the rim of the crater. Now as then, brown hands cast the best that their fields had yielded into the boiling depths to placate Smeroe.

The moon hung in the sky like a finely carved sickle of quartz. The sun flooded the countryside. It shone upon the green of the rice-fields and gleamed on the strong backs of the carabaos. It caressed Atoen in Madi's arms, and found even the Dalang, the teller of stories. He went his lonely way, from village to village, in his eyes the longing for fertile sawahs and plowing oxen, in his heart the treasure of his stories.