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The mouse deer as a trickster in Philippine folktales

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Abstract

This study explores mouse deer folktales from the Philippines. In these tales, mouse deer, called *pilanduk*, appear as tricksters. This study aims to explore such folktales and investigate why these animals are depicted in this way. The research method involved material studies designed to collect folktales for analysis and collecting, reading, and examining the details of literature about animal folktales, especially folktales about mouse deer in the Philippines. Prior to the library research, fieldwork was conducted on Balabac Island in Palawan Province. Results indicate that mouse deer folktales exist among at least four Muslim and indigenous groups on Mindanao Island, although mouse deer are a species native to Balabac Island of Palawan Province. Five specific mouse deer folktales were examined. In each case, the mouse deer functioned as a trickster, killing others, ridiculing their misfortunes, and plundering marriages. This article examines the characteristics of these folktales and discusses why mouse deer appear in folktales of ethnic groups, mainly on Mindanao Island. Variant mouse deer folktales are also found in Indonesia and Malaysia. It is possible that mouse deer folktales came from Islamic communities in Southeast Asia and that they may show cultural norms among Muslim societies.

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The tradition of folktales (*Kuwentong-bayan* in Tagalog) is meaningful to study because folktales reflect culture (Jorgensen, 2021). Folktales are often told through animals and are generally classified into three categories: (1) animal tales, (2) ordinal tales, and (3) jokes and anecdotes in the Philippines. Lopez (2006) classifies mouse deer trickster folktales into the last category. In folktales, animals are anthropomorphized and perform evil acts, including deception, plunder, theft, adultery, and showing hatred (Seki, 1955). This paper focuses on Philippine folktales that feature the mouse deer as a trickster to explore the cultural norms of the people among whom the stories originated.

The mouse deer is a small ungulate found in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa (Low et al., 2009; Meijaard & Groves, 2004). It is approximately 50 cm in length (Payne & Francis, 2005) and has usually been depicted as a mouse-like deer. It is forest-dwelling and solitary, tending to be more active during the day than at night. It generally hides near rocks, fallen trees, and in the bush and feeds on fallen fruits on the ground, as well as weeds and mushrooms. They sometimes appear in male/female pairs; the males can be identified by their longer teeth (Yasuma, 1985).

As its name suggests, the Philippine mouse deer (*Tragulus nigricans* Thomas) can be found in the Philippines (Alcala, 1975). The species is native to Balabac Island in Palawan Province, located in the southwestern region of the country (Dickerson, 1928)[1]. Known as *pilanduk* in its native country (Figure 1), it was placed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of threatened species (Severino, 1998) because it is hunted[2] for its meat[3] and is sought after as a pet.

This study explores mouse deer folktales of the Philippines from an anthropological viewpoint. Studies focusing on folktales are an effective means to explore people's views of animals and are indispensable for elucidating the ideas and cultural characteristics associated with the target animals. In previous studies, Momose (2010) examined the distribution and specific motifs associated with mouse deer folktales in Indonesia, which former studies had not clarified. Her research revealed that mouse deer appear in Indonesian folktales as tricksters and are valued for their wisdom (Carpenter, 1992; Carrington, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Matsui, 2013) but did not examine mouse deer folktales in the Philippines. A study by Dehino and San Jose (2020) examined the nature of mouse deer as a reflection of oppressed colonized Filipinos' imagined resistance against their colonizers. Previously, this author explored the cultural images of mouse deer based on their actual habits and behaviors (Tsuji, 2021a). As a result, it is found that folktales about mouse deer exist among ethnic groups in the Mindanao region, where there are no mouse deer.

No culture creates its own folktales from other places or cultures because folklore is an informally transmitted traditional culture (Jorgensen, 2021). In the Philippines, the condition is complicated due to the expansion of Islam, which replaced Hindu-Buddhism, the various native religions, the presence of Arab traders and adventurers, Chinese Muslims from South China, missionaries from Sumatra and Malaya, and the Spaniards who brought Catholicism to the country (Kiefer, 1972). These historical and cultural elements may be incorporated into folktales in the Philippines[4].

This study introduces mouse deer folktales from ethnic groups on Mindanao Island in the Philippines. It investigates the relationship between the actual mouse deer of Balabac Island and the animal as it appears in these folktales (Figure 2).

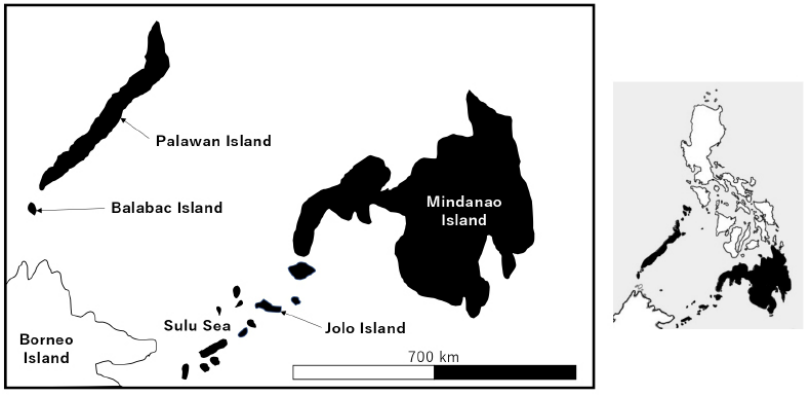
[1] Strictly speaking, mouse deer are distributed in Balabac Island, Bugsuc Island, and Ramos Island, all of which compose Balabac Island.
[2] Hunting for mouse deer is conducted at midnight. Hunters spot them with flash lights and shoot them with air guns.
[3] The meat of mouse deer is a favorite food among the indigenous Muslims of Balabac Island because it is halal.
[4] It is notable that Filipino writings, including folktales that survived the elements, were suspected of being connected with early pagan religion and were transformed by Hinduism and Islam and by Chinese by 15th century. Furthermore, they were systematically destroyed by Spanish missionaries to accelerate the growth of Christianity in the Philippines (Goto, 2002; Hollnsteiner, 1977; Lopez, 2006).

Figure 1

Mouse deer (Photo taken by the author on Balabac Island, Palawan Province, Philippines, February 2000)

Figure 2

Map of the research area



Materials and Methods

Literature about animal folktales in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia was collected, read, and examined. The author obtained most of the mouse deer folktales currently available at bookstores and online sites, except old literature, because they could not be verified. Prior to the library research, fieldwork was conducted on Balabac Island, located in the southern region of Palawan Province, for approximately one month (February 2000) to understand basic information and actual conditions of mouse deer. The

author has not yet had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork about mouse deer folktales on Mindanao Island. Next, a literature study was undertaken by researching mouse deer folktales in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia to analyze the characters and roles of mouse deer as portrayed in folktales. Systematic studies of mouse deer called *kancil* or *pelandok* in Indonesia, including Malaysia, have been conducted by Carrington (2016a, 2016b, 2017), Matsui (2013), and Momose (2010, 2013). Study in the Philippines is limited, but Dimalanta (1986) systematically investigated mouse deer folktales among the Maranao people on Mindanao Island. The research, however, is written in Tagalog. Similar trickster tales should be found in other parts of the world, but this article focused on literature related to the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Results and Discussion

The distribution of mouse deer folktales in the Southeast Asian context

Mouse deer folktales are mainly distributed in Austronesian-speaking areas (e.g., Borneo, Java, Sumatra, and Malaya), including the Philippines in Southeast Asia. Similar mouse deer folktales can be found not only in Malay communities but also among the Cham, one of the groups of indigenous Muslim people in Vietnam (Momose, 2013). In Indonesia, mouse deer avoid predators such as crocodiles and tigers (Carrington, 2016b; Matsui, 2013). One popular tale relates how the mouse deer seduces crocodiles to cross the river by counting the number of crocodiles (Carrington, 2016a; Matsui, 2013)[5]. This tale may be a variant of the monkey or rabbit[6] and crocodile folktale found in the Philippines (Eugenio, 1989; Tsuji, 2019, 2021b). Mouse deer folktales are concentrated on Mindanao Island, located in the southern part of the country. In the Philippines, mouse deer folktales are only found among the Maranao (Dimalanta, 1986). Similar folktales may exist on Balabac Island, the habitat of mouse deer, but this has not yet been confirmed.

Mouse deer folktales in the Philippines

The literature study identified five typical mouse deer folktales told in the Philippines. Although at least five folktales, including "*Pilandok (pilanduk)* and the dead Solotan (Sultan)," narrated by the Maranao, were investigated. All folktales about mouse deer have been told among the four ethnic groups on Mindanao Island—the Tausug, the Samal, the Maranao (who are Muslims), and the Manobo (who are indigenous people influenced by Islam). Muslims make up around 5% of the national population, but there is a fairly large number of Muslims, approximately 24%, on Mindanao Island. The Tausug is the dominant ethnic group in the Sulu Archipelago, where fishermen and traders with martial arts skills originally thrived, and many later adopted agriculture (Kiefer, 1972; Warren, 1982). The Samal (or the Sama), often called the Badjao, possess highly developed boat-building techniques and sometimes practice simple garden agriculture in the Sulu chain (Nimmo, 1972; Warren, 1982). Concentrated in the Lanao Provinces, the Maranao comprise one of the largest Muslim groups in the Philippines and are often businessmen, employees, or students (Disoma, 1990; Saber, 1963). An indigenous group in the hinterlands of western Davao, the Manobo, practices subsistence activities such as farming, fishing, hunting, and trapping (Garvan, 1941; Manuel, 2000). The ethno-networks among these ethnic groups have supported the creation of mouse deer folktales. Summaries of five mouse deer folktales documented are listed below (translated by the author; long tales were omitted). Hereafter, mouse deer are referred to as *pilanduk*.

Case 1

Pilanduk deceived a witch and got her magical cloak. He changed to the Sultan's clothing by using

[5] The mouse deer transformed into a monkey or fox (depending on the area). Similar folktales are found in Yakut, Tajik, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, African America, Chile, West Africa, Sudan, and Kenya (Uther, 2011).
[6] Rabbit appears in the Tausug folktale in Mindanao (Eugenio, 1989).

the cloak. Then, he went to the Sultan's residence, where no one doubted that he was a relative of the Sultan. He demanded to see the Sultan, who was approaching death. *Pilanduk* took charge of the Sultan's burial. The Sultan's son decided to give *Pilanduk* 20% of the Sultan's wealth, but he asked for more. He threatened the Sultan's son and successfully got 50% of the heritages (See Dimaranta, 1986; Lopez, 2006).

This folktale shows that *Pilanduk* is cleverer than the witch and the Sultan, who are in superior power than *Pilanduk*.

Case 2

Pilanduk, captured in a cage by the Datu[7] for his sins, escaped the cage while locking a victim in it. The cage was submerged in the sea, and the victim drowned. After being freed from death, *Pilanduk* went to the Datu and tempted the one who tried to kill him, trapped him in a cage, and threw him into the sea. As a result, he became the Datu anew (Coronel, 1997; Eugenio, 1985).

Case 2 is a reversal drama where the main character becomes a Datu after being a captive. *Pilanduk* provokes others and kills them to escape the crisis and for revenge, thus, playing a trick that reverses his destiny. This folktale is told among the Tausug, Samal, and Maranao. A variant is also found in Indonesia, where a dog is captured in a cage and killed by a farmer (Carrington, 2017).

Case 3

According to the elders, *Pilanduk* was the wisest man. On his way home one day with a box full of bees, he met an acquaintance who was a blind man. When the blind man asked what *Pilanduk* had, he devised a trick for the blind man. He said he was bringing the loudest gong on the island to the market, and the blind man offered to hit the gong. When he hit the box with a cane, the blind man was stung by bees all over his body and returned to the village trembling. *Pilanduk*, who watched the uproar from a distance, laughed loudly (Esteban et al., 2011).

Case 3 reveals the outrageousness of *Pilanduk*, who tricks even vulnerable people. He is also portrayed as lacking conscience and ridiculing the misery of others. Variants are found among the Maranao (Dimalanta, 1986) and in Indonesia (Carrington, 2016b).

Case 4

Pilanduk fell in love with the princess, but he was poor and could not pay the dowry. So, he planned to win her. Before bed, he knew the princess would put her expensive ring in a jewelry box. One night he broke into her room, stole her ring, and fled to the woods to hide it. The next morning, the King declared that anyone who found the missing ring could marry the princess. *Pilanduk* went to the King and said that he could find the ring. At first, the King did not acknowledge him. To get the King's attention, he predicted what the King would have for lunch. He had snooped on the food in advance, but the King was surprised and amused and said that if *Pilanduk* found the ring, the King would allow him to marry the princess. *Pilanduk* told the King where the ring was hidden, and there it was found. The King kept his promise and held a wedding ceremony between *Pilanduk* and the princess. The King asked about what food was suitable for the feast, but *Pilanduk* was nowhere to be found. He ran away from the castle in search of his own life. The King was angry and canceled the feast. In the end, *Pilanduk*, the thief, did not get the princess (Esteban et al., 2011).

[7] Datu is one of the appellations for the rulers who dominate indigenous people in the Philippines.

Case 4 concerns plunder and marriage. The author has recorded a similar song for the *runsay* dance[8] practiced among Muslims in southern Palawan (Tsuji, 2020), where the plunder marriage itself is not a surprising theme. This folktale makes *Pilanduk* appear as a scammer. He invades the house of others, steals valuables, pretends to be a prophet, finds valuables, and skillfully enters the holes in the hearts of others. In addition, it represents the carefreeness of a tired trickster who does not always fulfill his plans. This kind of folktale can be found globally (Thompson, 1946).

Case 5

A man named *Pilanduk* deceived his companion every time he opened his mouth. One day, he said he would kidnap the chief's wife (princess) and own her. To that end, he summoned the crocodile and said he would offer the princess to the crocodile if the crocodile took him to the opposite bank. The crocodile accepted the offer. Upon arriving at the chief's house, *Pilanduk* climbed a mango tree and sang in a bird-like voice to the princess, who listened to the song and ordered her servants to catch the bird. However, *Pilanduk* (disguised as the bird) could not be caught. When he sang again, she told the chief that she would divorce him if she could not catch the bird. Eventually, the princess could not stand it and went out alone at night to catch the bird herself.

Pilanduk then captured the princess, carried her on his shoulder, and ran away. Upon arriving at the riverbank, he summoned the crocodile. He told the crocodile that he would marry the princess himself and that he would find another woman for the crocodile. The crocodile was dissatisfied. While *Pilanduk* was dealing with the crocodile, a searcher found the princess and brought her back to the chief. The princess told the chief what had happened to her.

Meanwhile, the crocodile was angry and insisted on killing him. However, *Pilanduk* had to cross the river and return to the opposite bank, so he approached the crocodile to count how many enemies he had. Seduced by *Pilanduk*, numerous crocodiles surfaced on the water, enabling him to cross their backs to the opposite bank of the river as he counted the number of crocodiles. The crocodiles fell into tears following *Pilanduk*'s plot. *Pilanduk* then turned to mice, squirrels, and monkeys for help. He placed fire in the mountains and burned the crocodiles he had summoned there (Wrigglesworth, 1981).

Case 5, told among the Manobo, also relates to plunder marriage. *Pilanduk* sings a serenade to fascinate and plunder the princess. Multiple folktales are woven into this story, including the motifs of "the white rabbit and shark" and "the crab and monkey." These motifs are also present in folktales from Japan and other countries (Tsuji, 2021, 2022).

The uniqueness of *Pilanduk* folktales is recognized in that they are not subject to the sanctions often found in folktales of these motifs, such as stripping the skin of rabbits and exterminating monkeys. Also, *Pilanduk* tried to marry the princess, but other similar folktales (Case 4 and 5) do not approve of the marriage between an animal and a human. Although *pilanduk* is personified in the folktales, people do not accept him or the other characters. It has been found that people like trickster tails but do not favor the actual trickster's nature.

As mentioned above, all five folktales integrate the character of the mouse deer as (1) an animal anthropomorphized as a human man, (2) a scammer who cheats on others and is a sly trickster character

[8] The runsay dance is practiced mainly after wedding ceremonies. Young men and women sing and dance in a circle. The purpose of the dance is to find one's future fiancé or spouse (Tsuji, 2020). The Tagbanwa, one of the major indigenous groups in Palawan, conducts the runsay to appeal to the spirits to prevent epidemic sickness (Fox, 1982).

(not admired and known for playing with his victims), (3) a brutal character who traps or kills others, and (4) a character who is sloppy and unable to carry out his strategies perfectly. In this way, all folktales examined in this study reveal the ambiguously imaged nature of mouse deer. Above all, he is summarized as a trickster, an entity that possesses the above-mentioned properties of (2) to (4).

Conclusion

As a result of the literature study, only five cases of mouse deer folktales narrated by four ethnic groups on Mindanao Island were confirmed. This may occur because monkeys and crocodiles can be found in many areas in the Philippines, while mouse deer have small populations and limited habitats, causing them to be less noticed by people.

All folktales portray mouse deer as tricksters who make fun of others by playing pranks[9]. But mouse deer are also rich in wisdom and tactics. The characteristics of mouse deer in the Philippines consist of the capability to commit murder (found in Cases 2 and 5).

The folktales presented in this article were not shared by the people of Balabac Island, where mouse deer reside[10]. It is strange and interesting that mouse deer, a species native to Balabac Island, occupy the rich folktales among the peoples of Mindanao Island. The groups among which the folktales originated—Tausug, Samal, and Maranao—originated from Mindanao Island and are also settled in Palawan Province. Many have established an ethno-network that involves buying and selling goods at markets and shops with the local indigenous people of the island. At the same time, the Tausug are the dominant ethnic group in the Sulu trading zone[11] that emerged during the late 18th and 19th centuries and dominated both Samalan-speaking people at the time and migrants to Sulu later (Warren, 1982). The Manobo comprise an indigenous people based on Mindanao Island; it is unlikely that they are connected to Palawan Island and its indigenous people. Based on such arguments, it cannot be proven that mouse deer folktales are shared among the inhabitants of Balabac Island and Palawan Island. It also seems unlikely that the folktales spread from these islands in Palawan Province to Mindanao Island. In Palawan Province, instead, folktales about megafaunas, such as crocodiles and sharks, play a significant role in indigenous identities (Tsuji, 2012, 2021b), and mouse deer folktales are not common. Alternatively, the folktales on Mindanao Island could be borrowed from Indonesia or Borneo Island of east Malaysia, judging by their strong similarities (Carrington, 2016a, 2016b, 2017).

This study's exploration of five mouse deer folktales confirms that mouse deer occupy the role of trickster and convey a negative image. Animals that harm humans, such as crocodiles and sharks, are similarly detrimental. However, due to their supernatural powers, they are seen as awe-inspiring and recognized as human ancestors and gods (Tsuji, 2012). No such sublime point can be found in mouse deer folktales. Although mouse deer are favored as hunting targets, it is unclear why they are viewed negatively. According to the local people on Balabac Island, mouse deer are nocturnal and do not often appear in public. People may attempt to interpret mouse deer culturally by labeling them as tricksters. In addition, the portrayal of mouse deer as tricksters in Philippine folktales can be understood as a projection of human thoughts and actions based on arbitrariness. In theory, the peculiarity of animals is that they are close to

[9] In Philippine folktales, similar stories are often told with monkeys as the main characters (Tsuji, 2022).
[10] After more than 20 years of research in Palawan Province, the author could not gather mouse deer folktales from the local people in Balabac Island although the people may have the folktales. The author probably was not able to research them properly. This will be addressed further in future research.
[11] In the Sulu trading zone, except for slave trading and piracy, maritime and jungle products such as sea cucumbers, bird's nests, wax, camphor, mother of pearl, and tortoise shell were traded with China and the British East India Company. In return, textiles, opium, guns, and gun powder were exported to the Sulu (Warren, 1985, 2000).

humans in a spatial sense but different from humans; they are similar to humans but cannot be humans. For this reason, animals are often anthropomorphized (Willis, 1979).

The cultural groups of Mindanao Island have preserved mouse deer with a trickster character in their folktales. People have narrated the folktales even though they are unfamiliar with the actual mouse deer. Mouse deer folktales embody the sly and foolish side of human nature, and it can be assumed that their characteristics are easily associated with the nature of human beings as tricksters. It is suggested that further study of the literature should be conducted to support this assumption and to examine the ideas of the Islamic people who reside on Mindanao Island and share mouse deer folktales. It is natural that mouse deer folktales connect to the variants of Indonesia and Malaysia geographically. Mindanao Island and Palawan Island are also connected through the Islamic ethno-network, and images of mouse deer may have been created by human movements between the Islands. This article concludes that Muslim populations on Mindanao Island share mouse deer folktales as part of their Muslim identities and examples of malice based on their cultural and social values. This article clarified the characteristics of mouse deer folktales in the Philippines. They are mainly preserved among the Muslim populations, including the indigenous populations influenced by Islam, but not Christian populations in Mindanao Island. Further research in several areas and among various Muslim populations in Mindanao Island is needed to investigate the Islamic elements.

In addition, developing a deeper understanding of the mouse deer will help further the investigation of the relationship between them and the Filipino people. Furthermore, mouse deer folktales should be investigated globally as a universal human concept (Brown, 2002)[12] to create understanding between people. In addition, by promoting mouse deer folktales in the past, present, and future, it may be possible to enlighten the world about mouse deer conservation.

In summary, this study examined mouse deer folktales and their associated folktales to nurture our mercy for the endangered animal and to explore and preserve the unique folktales in the Philippines. Further study about mouse deer folktales and the variant forms should be conducted in the future to understand the types of these folktales and the relationships between animals and human beings.

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