

# Some Notes on the Garuda with Brief References to its Appearances in Traditional Malay Legends

by  
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**Abstrak:** *Berbagai andaian timbul apabila ditemukan dan dikehendaki memberi maklumat mengenai 'Garuda'. Penulis berusaha untuk memberi penjelasan mengenai watak, peranan, asal-usul dan rupa bentuk Garuda yang dinyatakan dalam sumber-sumber rujukan mengenai mitologi Hindu. Watak Garuda juga dilihat dalam beberapa cerita klasik Melayu supaya perbandingan dapat diperlihatkan secara ringkas.*

It is somewhat refreshing for a librarian to receive once in a while an enquiry which not only instigates a thorough search of immediately available sources in the library but which also provokes self-interest and the need to know more about the subject in hand. This happens to the writer, when, on a quiet and uneventful morning, she is asked to find out what she can on the subject of the 'Garuda'.

The first thing that comes to mind is that it is a sort of an eagle and secondly, it is the name of the Indonesian Airline System. Bearing in mind that a systematic search has to be made to verify these assumptions, the writer attempts to look at the sources that are available in the library. It is the writer's intention to study the Garuda as he is portrayed in sources on Hindu mythology and Malay legends and to make some comparisons with regard to his functions and characterization. Several dictionaries and encyclopedias are looked into. The Malay dictionaries generally give very brief definitions under the term 'geroda'. However it is in the dictionaries on Hinduism and its mythology that some light is thrown on the term.

Garuda's birth is best described by Benjamin Walker<sup>1</sup> as:

"A mythical bird, the offspring of the sage Kasyapa by Vinata, daughter of the Maharishi Daksha. He was hatched from an enormous egg

five hundred years after his mother laid him". Of his physical attributes, Walker further describes him as:

"... half giant and half eagle with body and limbs of a man, head, beak, talons of an eagle... Such was the radiance that shone from his presence that the gods mistook him for Agni, god of fire and worshipped him. He is depicted with a white face, red wing and body of gold".

Gosta Liebert<sup>2</sup> describes the "Garuda" as a mythical being which is perhaps the prototype of the conception of the phoenix. In statuettes, he is often seen in a pose with both arms stretched with the palms turned upwards. This posture signifies the support, humility and devotion to the Lord Vishnu.

Benjamin Walker, mentions a further description of the "Garuda's" parentage. It seems that his father has two wives, Vinata and Kadru. There exists some enmity between the two wives. Kadru is the mother of the Nagas or serpent people. Therefore Garuda inherits his mother's dislike for snakes and he is well known in Hindu legends as the destroyer of serpents. Garuda's eldest son by Syeni (falcon) is *Jatayu* (Jentayu?) who is the king of the vultures. Jatayu, like his father is portrayed as subservient to the gods. He is described as having saved Dasaratha from Sani (Saturn) while in combat. Dasaratha, who is hit by Sani's fiery discus, is sent hurtling back to earth

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, Benjamin. *Hindu world: an encyclopedia survey of Hinduism*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968, Vol.1, p. 381-382.

<sup>2</sup> Liebert, Gosta. *Iconographic dictionary of the Indian religion: Hindum-Buddhism-Jainism*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976.

but is swooped up by Jatayu who then bears him down safely with outspread wings. Jatayu is also a witness to the abduction by Rawana of Sita Dewi, Seri Rama's consort. In his attempt to save Sita, Jatayu is mortally wounded by Rawana and falls headlong to earth. Seri Rama comes across the dying vulture king and manages to hear the story about Sita's abduction before he dies. In gratitude, Rama performs his funeral rites and his soul ascends to heaven in a chariot of fire. Another of Garuda's son is *Sampati* by Unnati. Sampati boasts that he can soar to the sun and in attempting to do this, scorches his wings and falls on a mountain top where he is found by Hanuman. He informs the monkey chieftan of the direction in which Rawana has taken Sita whereupon his wings are suddenly and miraculously restored. So it seems that even Garuda's son Sampati serves the gods.

In Hindu legends Garuda is often given various names as usefully described by John Dawson.<sup>3</sup> Garuda has many names and epithets. Dawson says that from his parents, he is called *Kasyapi* and *Vainateya*. He is the *Suparna* and the *Garutman* or chief of birds. He is also called *Dakshaya*, *Salmalin*, *Tarkshya* and *Vinayaka*. Among his epithets are the following; *Sitanana* 'white faced'; *Rakta-puksha* – red winged; *Sweta-rohita* – the white and red; *Suvarna-kaya* – golden bodied; *Gaganeswara* – Lord of the sky; *Khayeswara* – king of birds; *Nagantaka and Pannaga-nasana* – destroyer of serpents; *Sarparati*, enemy of serpents; *Taraswin* – the swift; *Rasyana* – who moves like quicksilver; *Kama-charin* – who goes where he will; *Kamayus* – who lives at pleasure; *Surendrafit* – vanguard of Indra; *Vagra-jit* – subduer of the thunderbolt and many others.

Margaret and James Stutley give us a further insight into the use of the Garuda myth in Hindu culture.<sup>4</sup> Garuda is popularly believed to have the power to cure those suffering from snake bites as

well as those suffering from the possession of evil spirits. It is believed that those who embrace the Garuda temple pillar can be cured from snake bites. There are also the Garuda mantras which are said to be most efficacious for the expiation of 'sin'. The uses of the Garuda's mantras are well illustrated in the *Agni Puranam*.<sup>5</sup> For an example volume I of the *Agni Puranam* illustrates a Garuda mantra:

"Om Tarksya (Garuda), cast down by enemies, trample the disease and venom that might invade me". This practice also seeps through to the Javanese culture. Himansu Bhusan Sarkan<sup>6</sup> in his book on Javanese and Balinese literature of Indian influence mentions various Javanese mantras which are in the form of invocations to the gods for help and protection as well as for the cure of diseases and physical disabilities. The Garuda mantras are also especially used as charms against snake bites.

Having perused through the dictionaries and encyclopedias, a search is also made of the various legends in which the Garuda is depicted. In a selection of stories from the Puranas that is edited and translated by Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitemen,<sup>7</sup> the birth of the Garuda and the derivation of his function with regard to Lord Vishnu is described. When Garuda crawls out of his egg shell, he is immediately hungry for a meal. He approaches his mother for food and is asked to go to his father who is doing his *tapa's* (meditation) on the northern bank of the Lauhitya. His father consents to his eating a hundred thousand evil *nisadas* (aborigines) living on the ocean shores but warns him not to touch any Brahmin who may live amongst them. The Garuda however accidently swallows a Brahmin who is stuck in his craw. This makes it impossible for the Garuda to either swallow or spit out. He goes to his father who tries to coax the Brahmin into releasing his son's craw. The Brahmin threatens that he will 'give up the ghost' inside the Garuda (take away his

<sup>3</sup> Dawson, John. *A classical dictionary of Hindu mythology and religion, geography, history and literature*. 7th ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950, p. 109-110.

<sup>4</sup> Stutley, Margaret & James Stutley. *A dictionary of Hinduism, its mythology, folklore and developments 1500 BC – AD 1500*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, p. 95-96.

<sup>5</sup> Mannatha Nath Dutt Shastri (tr.). *Agni puranam: a prose English translation*. Varanasi, India: Chaokhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1967, Vol.1, p. 530.

<sup>6</sup> Sarkan, Himansu Bhusan. *Indian influences on the literature of Java and Bali*. Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1934, p. 75

<sup>7</sup> Dimmitt, Cornelia & J.A.B. van Buitemen (eds.). *Classical Hindu mythology: a reader in the Sanskrit Puranas*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978, p. 345-347.

soul), if the nisadas who are his friends and himself are not released. For fear of becoming a Brahmin murderer, the Garuda spits out all that he has swallowed. His father then advises him to go to the ocean where two creatures, a giant elephant and a tortoise, are quarrelling to satisfy his (the Garuda's) hunger. Having caught both the tortoise and the elephant, he cannot find a place that is stable enough to perch on in order to eat his prey (this indicates his magnitude). It is at this juncture that he meets Vishnu, who assumes the form of a man. Vishnu invites him to perch on his arm to eat his prey. Seeing that after eating, the Garuda is still hungry, Vishnu invites him to eat the flesh of his arm. Garuda eats this plentiful flesh. However the arm does not show any wound. Having satisfied his hunger, the Garuda asks Lord Vishnu what favours he can do in return. Hari (another name for Vishnu), Lord of the God of gods says,

"Be my mount, heroic friend, for all time to come"

Lord Vishnu is often arrayed by a collection of distinguishing accoutrements that serve to symbolise his own personal identity. These include his weapons, jewels, animals, spouse and mount, and the particular animal on which he rides through space is always the Garuda.

"The Ocean of Story", translated by C. H. Tawney, describes the devotion Garuda has for his mother and how he becomes to be known as the hater of serpents.<sup>8</sup> Volume two covers Garuda's plight to save his mother (Vinnata) from Kadru's enslavement. The story goes that Kadru and Vinnata have a dispute. The former insists that the sun's horses are black, while the latter says that they are white. Kadru, bent on winning, induces her sons, the serpents, to defile the horses by spitting venom over them. Showing the horses to Vinnata in that condition, Kadru declares herself the winner, and Vinnata is made her slave. After endless persuasion by Garuda to release his mother, Kadru agrees to compromise that she will do so if Garuda can steal the nectar, *amrita* (nectar of immortality and a

forbidden juice) from the sea of milk that is churned out by the Gods. Successful in his endeavour, Garuda gives the nectar to Kadru in exchange for his mother. The God Indra discovers the theft and gives chase. In a terrible battle Indra manages to snatch away the goblet of precious liquid just as the serpent is about to drink it. A drop however spills on to the ground which the serpent licks. He thus gains a divided tongue. Since the snake does not obtain immortality, Garuda swoops down and devours it and continues to do so, until in another episode, he repents himself for having eaten too many snakes.

There is also a purana called the *Garuda Purana* (saroddhara). The available translated English version is by Ernest Wood and S. V. Subrahmanyam.<sup>9</sup> This purana is a continuous dialogue between Garuda and Vishnu concerning religious matters such as sins, deaths, death rites and birth.

The influence of Hinduism on traditional Malay legends is evident in the early Hikayats, such as Hikayat Seri Rama which relates stories from the Ramayana and stories from the Mahabharatas, such as, Hikayat Pandawa Lima, Hikayat Pendawa Jaya, Hikayat Sang Boma and many others. As such the Garuda often appears in these legends.

Amongst the Hindu influenced Hikayats, Garuda's son 'Jentayu' is mentioned in the Hikayat Seri Rama. In the version related by W.G. Shellabear,<sup>10</sup> Jentayu is a witness to Sita Dewi's abduction by Rawana. His function is to relate the whereabouts in which Rawana has taken Sita. Another Garuda character appears in the battle scene between Indrajit (Rawana's son) and Sri Rama. Hanuman summons a Garuda to help them. The Garuda spreads his wings to shelter Sri Rama and his forces against the stones and rain which Indrajit sends down from the heavens for 40 days and nights. It is during a pause in the rain and when the sun appears that the Garuda carries Sri Rama to safety. A similar version is related by Farid Mohd. Onn that is based on a manuscript found in the collection of the Kedah, Royal family!<sup>11</sup> In the Indonesian edition, that is edited and transliterated by Achadiati

<sup>8</sup> *The Ocean of Story*, translated by C.H. Tawney and edited by N.M. Penzer. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968, Vol.2, p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, Ernest & S.V. Subrahmanyam (tr.). *The Garuda Purana (Saroddhara)*. New York: Ams Press, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Shellabear, W.G. (ed.) "Hikayat Seri Rama", *Journal of the Straits Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 70 (April 1917). Based upon the Bodleian manuscript, 291.

<sup>11</sup> Farid Mohd Onn. *Cheritera Seri Rama*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1965, p. 43.

Ikram, the Garuda summoned by Hanuman is known as Garuda Mahabiru.<sup>12</sup>

Amongst the various versions of the stories that are taken from the Mahabhratas, the Garuda prominently appears in Hikayat Sang Boma.<sup>13</sup>

A Garuda called Wilmana is given as a gift by Batapu Baruna to Maharaja Bomantara (Boma). Raja Boma is portrayed as being coarse, arrogant and not only does he use the Garuda Wilmana as his mount in battles but also to carry out his biddings. The Wilmana in this case is frequently shot down by Arjuna who is the saviour of Dewi Janati who has refused to wed the uncouth and ugly Boma. However the Garuda Wilmana always manages to be revived to life as Boma possesses the flower of life that is given to him by his mother. On one occasion, Krisna who comes to help Arjuna, calls forth another Garuda called Mahameru to destroy Wilmana. This however fails because they are equally matched. Finally it is Hanuman who manages to kill both Wilmana and Boma. The immense size of the Garuda in this story is clearly seen in the description of the battle between Wilmana and Mahameru. The atmosphere was described as:

“Seperti tegar di langit, tiada berkeputusan dan bunyinya, seperti halilintar membelah bumi. Maka Matahari pun redup-redup dan segala awan pun habis berterbangan diembus sajak garuda dan sajak Wilmana itu.” (p. 268)<sup>14</sup>

“Like continuous thunders in the sky and the sound is like the striking of a lightning, dividing the earth. The sun was overshadowed and all clouds were dispersed and blown away by the flapping wings of the Garuda (Mahameru) and Wilmana”.

In the truly traditional Malay stories, the physical attributes of the Garuda, such as its magnitude and power are still highly portrayed. In the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa that is edited and transliterated by Siti Hawa Salleh,<sup>15</sup> the Garuda is said to be

a descendant of Raja Dewa. He is exceedingly wise and powerful and is feared by all birds and beasts. Garuda receives news from the eagle Jentayu that Raja Rum is marrying off his son to the daughter of the Emperor of China. The Garuda flies to seek audience with Nabi Sulaiman, relating the news and saying his belief that such a match is not fitting because the two countries are so far apart. Nabi Sulaiman however replies that if it is the will of Allah that they should marry nothing can be done to prevent it from happening. However Garuda is given permission to try to do as he wishes. The Garuda attacks the prince of Rum's fleet, sinking his ships and the prince falls into the sea and is believed to be drowned. It is in these attacks that the might and power of the Garuda is clearly described. His arrival is akin to the arrival of a storm that is accompanied by thunderous sounds, lightning and rain. He also seems to be immune to shots by arrows and cannons.

“Peluru meriam dan bedil itu dengan beberapa pula anak panah segala raja-raja seperti hujan yang lebat rupanya datang mengenai kepada tuboh burung garuda itu, suatu pun tiada singgah, habis bertaburan dan berkibar melayang di dalam laut itu, jika kena ke tubuh burung garuda itu jangankan hendak luka tubuhnya, bulunya pun tiada luruh barang sehelai”. (p. 89)

The story ends with the marriage between the prince of Rum and the Chinese princess, proving that it is indeed god's will that they should be wed. As a result the Garuda is banished to the sea of Kolzum (Red Sea), to which mankind cannot approach. He is supposed to remain there to this day. The English version of the story is given by R. N. Bland.<sup>16</sup> This story has also been adapted into a dance drama created and choreographed by Azanin Ezane called 'Jentayu'.<sup>17</sup>

Bird-like creatures that possess human attributes, such as the ability to talk and having mythical powers such as the ability to fly to the heavens, occur

<sup>12</sup> Ikram, Achadiati. *Hikayat Sri Rama: suntingan naskah disertai telaah amanat dan struktur*. Jakarta: Penerbit Universitas Indonesia, 1980; para: 551-555.

<sup>13</sup> Idrus. *Sang Boma: (hikayat kuno dari zaman Hindu)*. Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1964. 97p.

<sup>14</sup> *Hikayat Sang Boma*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1959, p. 268.

<sup>15</sup> Siti Hawa Saleh. *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970.

<sup>16</sup> Bland, R.N. "Story of the burong Geruda and the Raja Merong Mahawangsa", *Journal of the Straits Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 54 (January 1910), p. 107-115.

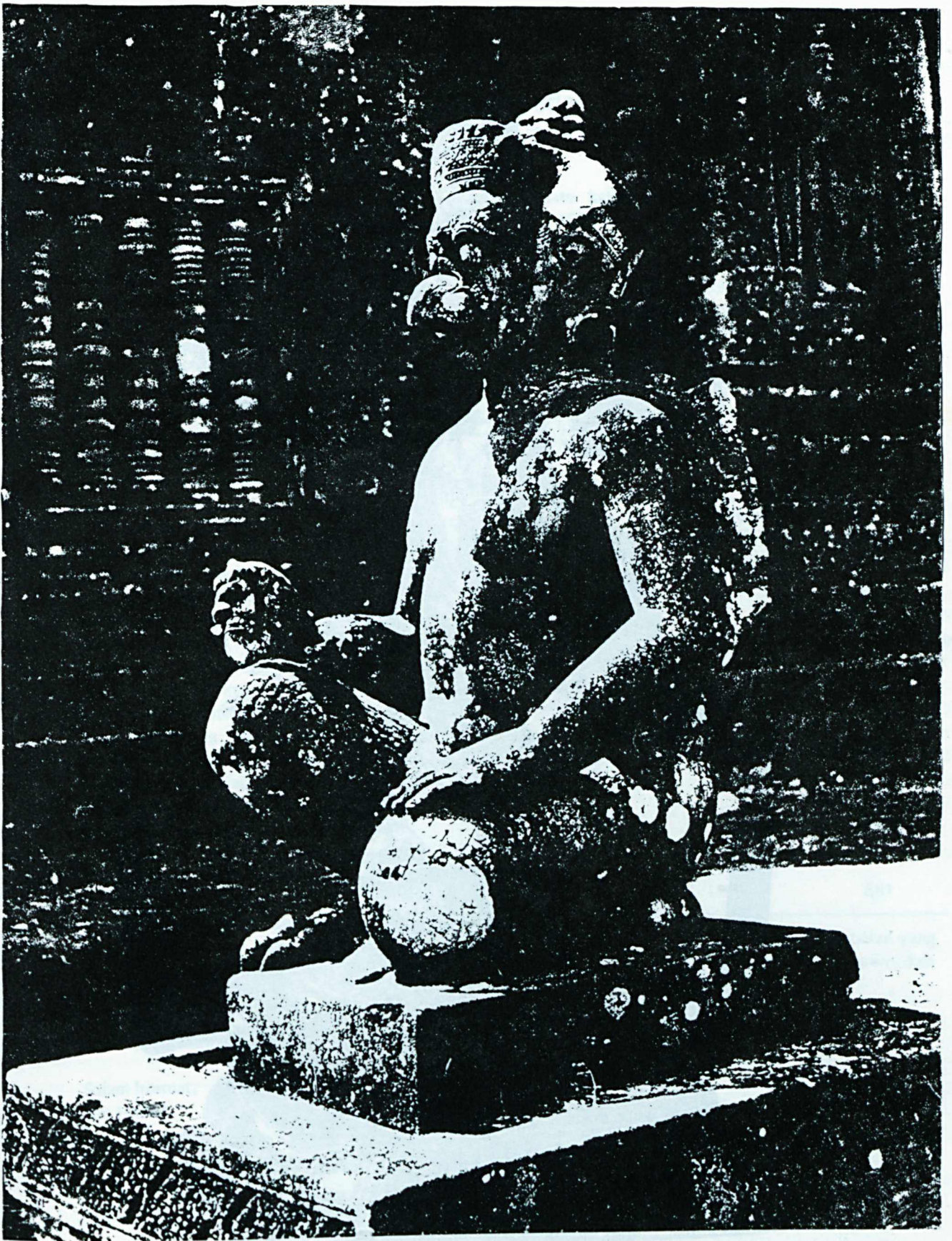
<sup>17</sup> *Jentayu: keratan akhbar, 1980-1981*. Unpublished 1980.

frequently in many traditional Malay stories. However the bird Garuda appears only in a handful of stories as mentioned above. Sometimes, the term Garuda is not used but a bird akin to his attributes is related. Hikayat Malim Dewa mentions a huge bird called the "Borak".<sup>18</sup> Borak is owned by Tun Putri Terus Mata. He is portrayed as obedient and subservient to his master and forms the mount on which Tuanku Malim Deman uses to fly to the heavens. In Syair Selendang Delima,<sup>19</sup> the Garuda is a symbol of evil who sets his heart to destroy Bandar Prus - killing every living being in it except Raja Abang Segeri and Puteri Seri Benian. The Garuda is eventually killed by Dewa Laksana who marries Seri Benian.

The Garuda in Malay legends, apart from those found in stories based on the Ramayana and Mahabharatas, is usually portrayed as powerful and destructive. This differs from the Garuda in Hindu mythology-based stories in which the Garuda is regarded as virtuous, subservient and devoted to his masters. Even the offsprings of the Garuda, Jatayu and Sampati strive to serve the Gods. Hence available sources clearly indicate that the Garuda is much more than just an eagle or a crest used by the Indonesian Airline System. It is the true symbol of strength, swiftness and valour. Yet it is relentlessly loyal and humble, a champion of good against greed, injustice and evil.

<sup>18</sup> *Hikayat Malim Dewa*, dialihaksarakan oleh, Ramli Harun. Jakarta: Proyek Penerbitan Buku Sastra Indonesia dan Daerah, 1980.

<sup>19</sup> *Shair Seri Benian atau Selendang Delima*. Singapura: Sulaiman Ma'ri (193?), 92p.



Guardian Garuda found in Banteay Srei, Cambodia. Photograph taken from, *The art of Indian Asia: its mythology and transformations*, by Heinrich Zimmer. Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University Press, 1968 Vol. 2 pl. 523



Garuda Carrying Visnu and Laksmi found in South India. Zimmer, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pl. 425