

Heroines, Heroes and Cosmic Power

The two couples featured here live in very different worlds. Dewi Subadra & Arjuna belong to a courtly, refined world of lowland kingdoms and are the epitome of the *priyayi* or 'aristocratic' class, while Aruring Menepo Boong & Toked Rini belong to a small ethnic group living in an upland, interior area of Borneo, where they are considered to be *lun doo to'oh* or 'really good people'.

However, both couples represent ideal humans in SE Asian eyes and have fundamentally similar characteristics. Whether they are from a lowland, courtly society or an upland group, heroines and heroes like our two couples are refined, elegant and beautiful – and at the same time competent and effective. They are able to effectively look after those who depend on them and follow them, our heroines and heroes.

Our heroines and heroes are able to do this because they are imbued with what is perhaps best described as 'cosmic power' in English. In lowland kingdoms this is known by various terms, including *kuasa* (in Malay) and *daya* (in Javanese). Among the Kelabit of Borneo, the group to whom Toked Rini and Aruring Menepo Boong belong, it is known as *lalud*.

In SE Asia, it is believed that cosmic power accumulates in certain spots. This includes human heroines and heroes. Toked Rini and Aruring Menepo Boong are said to 'shimmer' with cosmic power, as can be seen in the painting of Toked Rini shown here. Their high levels of cosmic power mean that our heroines and heroes are wholly or partly spirits or deities.

The two couples also represent the same ideal characteristics of men and women. The heroines Aruring Menepo Boong and Dewi Subadra are at the still, powerful centre of the societies to which they belong. Rice-growing is central to this centre within both upland and lowland societies in SE Asia. It is women who are responsible for rice-growing, and both Aruring Menepo Boong and Dewi Subadra are closely associated with the Rice Goddess – known by the Kelabit as Derayeh, and Dewi Sri in lowland kingdoms.

The heroes Toked Rini and Arjuna enter the wild, untamed world to hunt, head-hunt and do battle. Through this, they access and bring back wild cosmic power to the centre, which accumulates there. Through the rice meal, wild cosmic power is processed and fed, together with rice, to those who are dependant on the central heroes and heroines of both upland and lowland societies.