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# Honey-bees, court ladies, and beekeeping in Java before 1500 CE

JIRÍ JÁKL

## ABSTRACT

People have been interacting with bees in the Indo-Malay world for thousands of years. Though the practice of robbing bees of honey and wax is relatively well-documented, we know very little about the early history of beekeeping in Southeast Asia. In this study I will use Old Javanese evidence to demonstrate that providing honey bees with artificial cavities was a practice known in Java at least by the twelfth century CE, several centuries earlier than suggested by the historians of beekeeping. In the second part of my contribution I will discuss in detail an intriguing passage in the *Sumanasāntaka*, a court poem composed in the early thirteenth century CE, in which a literary motif of the “marriage by choice” (*swayamwara*) of Princess Indumatī is based on the image and structure of beehive. The idea that a bee-colony is ruled by the “queen” rather than the “king” was not widely known in pre-modern world, and the *Sumanasāntaka* suggests that pre-Islamic Javanese were good observers of nature.

## KEYWORDS

Old Javanese poetry; bees; beekeeping; pre-Islamic Java.

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INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

It has been almost fifty years since P.J. Zoetmulder (1974: 202) expressed his view that “[a] short essay might be written about the bee in Old Javanese poetry”. Well-aware of the richness of the imagery pertaining to honey-bees in *kakawin* poems, Zoetmulder devoted just half a page to this seemingly trivial topic. I shall demonstrate in this article that honey-bees, associated in early Java with Kāma and his divine wife Ratih, not only figure prominently in the court imagination but that the image of bee’s nest or beehive reflects some key issues in Javanese views of the court and its workings. Known under its indigenous name *kumbang*, and a score of Sanskrit loans, the bee appears in many descriptions of nature. It comes as little surprise that Old Javanese images of honey-bees have often been adopted from Sanskrit *kāvya* poetry.<sup>2</sup> However, reading of *kakawin* reveals that Javanese poets were good observers of nature and they often introduced fresh imagery which has no parallels in Sanskrit texts. Compared to their Indian colleagues, Javanese poets were more interested in the metaphorical meanings of honey-bees as a reflection of the court, its workings, and its values: dress, music, means of transport, ceremonies, and social values are all reflected in distinct way the imagery based on honey-bees was used. Moreover, in at least two texts poets introduce the image of a beehive, making it the earliest reference to beekeeping in maritime Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup>

## BEES, HONEY-BEES, AND BUMBLEBEES

People in the Indo-Malay region have been interacting with bees for thousands of years and robbing bees of honey must have been an opportunistic activity carried out to take advantage of this calorie-rich food stuff. On the other hand, beekeeping does not seem to be an ancient tradition in Southeast Asia, although it can be traced at least to the twelfth century CE in Cambodia (see

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank to Melani Budianta and Dick van der Meij for their valuable comments and notes, which helped me substantially to improve the final version of this article.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine own, unless stated otherwise. I transcribe Old Javanese according to the system implemented by Zoetmulder (1982), but have taken the licence to simplify the transcription of several letters: *ŋ* is transcribed as *ng* and *ě* (*pepet*) is transcribed as *e* (so that there is no difference between *ě* and *e*). This compromise results from the wise advice of one of my anonymous reviewers that Zoetmulder’s transcription might well cause problems for those Indonesian readers who are not specialists in Old Javanese language. I believe this “simplified” transcription will make the reading more comfortable for the non-philologist readers. Sanskrit words are transcribed in the system commonly used for the transcription of (ancient) Indian languages. Sanskrit loans in Old Javanese, however, are transcribed in the simplified transcription.

<sup>3</sup> A separate study can be written about the products of bees, especially honey and wax, and their use in early Java. Wax must have been crucial in Javanese bronze-making, being utilized as a major ingredient in the lost-wax technique (*cire perdue*), and might also have been used in the decoration of reserve-dyed textiles. In Java, honey seems to have been mainly a remedy rather than a sweetening agent. This emphasis on the healing properties of honey might have been common in Southeast Asia, for the use of honey as remedy is also documented from ancient Cambodia (P.D. Sharrock and C. Jacques 2017). In this study I have omitted references to the consumption of young bees and its symbolic associations, a practice attested in *Deśawarnana* (89.5) and elsewhere.

Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Among the nine honey-bee species known worldwide, five are native to Southeast Asia (F. Ruttner 2013). The Asian giant honey-bee (*Apis dorsata*), sometimes also called the giant rock-bee, builds a single-comb nest in the open. Historically, all honey from this bee was obtained from natural nests, most of which could be reached only after a hazardous climb (Eva Crane 2000: 15). The Asian honey-bee (*Apis cerana*), which is very suitable for beekeeping, is intermediate in size and in the wild builds a multiple-comb nest in a cavity (Crane 2000: 16). Another two less important cavity-nesting honey-bees native to Southeast Asia are *Apis koschevnikovi* and *Apis nigrocincta*. Finally, there is the red dwarf bee (*Apis florea*), which forms small colonies of a few thousand bees with their nest consisting of a single comb (Ruttner 2013).<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. Angkor Wat, Cambodia, the men carrying two horizontal beehives (left side); the men transporting honey in a large vessel (right side). (The picture was kindly provided by Professor Gene Kritsky).

The five species listed above must have been known in Java by the term *kumbang*, considered to be an indigenous Old Javanese name for ‘bee’ (Zoetmulder 1974: 202). Elsewhere, however, Zoetmulder (1982: 921) interprets Old Javanese *kumbang* as ‘large black bee’.<sup>6</sup> In several Old Javanese passages, the colour of the *kumbang* is said to be black.<sup>7</sup> In few other passages, the colour

<sup>4</sup> At least one relief at Angkor Wat (twelfth century CE) has been interpreted as evidence of beekeeping. I am grateful to Gene Kritsky for sharing a photograph of the relief with me.

<sup>5</sup> The well-known European honey-bee (*Apis mellifera*) was introduced to Java in modern times.

<sup>6</sup> This interpretation is based on the meaning of modern *kumbang*, as well as on Old Javanese literary descriptions. For modern *kumbang*, see for example S.O. Robson and Singgih Wibisono (2002: 390), who gloss it as ‘a large black buzzing bee’.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* (2.7): ‘black *kumbangs*’ (*kumbang ahireng*). Old Javanese text taken from Willem van der Molen (2015). Translations of the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* taken from Robson (2015), if not stated otherwise.

of the wings of *kumbang* is said to be black.<sup>8</sup> Although Old Javanese *kumbang* would refer to any bee, not just a honey-bee in particular, the black bees of Old Javanese literature are almost certainly the Asian giant honey-bees (*Apis dorsata*). Sometimes, scholars of Old Javanese literature render *kumbang* (as well as Sanskrit loanwords for honey-bee) as ‘bumblebee’, a misidentification which can be traced back to Indian literary models.<sup>9</sup> The bumblebees belong to a different genus, they form only small communities and produce very little honey. Klaus Karttunen (2009: 89), who has discussed the honey-bee in Sanskrit literature, notes that honey-bees are often misidentified as bumblebees because of the large size and dark colour they share.

Along with the native *kumbang*, there is a score of Sanskrit loanwords for honey-bee attested to in Old Javanese poetry: *ali*, *bhramara* (‘moving about’), *bhṛngga*, *dwirepha*, *madhubrata*, *madhukara* (honey-maker), *madhupa*, *puṣpalit*, *śaṭpada/śaḍpada* (six-legged). Some of these words, such as *bhramara* and *madhubrata*, must have been well-known, while others, such as *bhṛngga*, are rare in Old Javanese texts and their meaning needed an explanation, typically in the form of a gloss of a better-known term.<sup>10</sup>

#### BEES AND THEIR HUMMING

In Old Javanese literature, insects are typically characterized by their sounds rather than by form or colour. The humming and buzzing of bees are typically referred to by the term *hṛng/panghṛng*, which denotes a deep persistent sound, also used for rumbling, grumbling, and growling (Zoetmulder 1982: 643). Another, less common but highly onomatopoeic verb used for bee’s buzzing is *bṛngeng(eng)*.<sup>11</sup> The buzzing of honey-bees is described as pleasant, even charming.<sup>12</sup> In Sanskrit literature, bees and cuckoos or coels (*kokila*) and their sounds are often mentioned together as symbols of spring and love (Karttunen 2009: 108). The same motif is prominent in Old Javanese literature, in which the humming of bees can incite passion and love. In the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa*, a text composed in the late-ninth century CE, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa listen to the calling of *kokilas* and the buzzing of honey-bees by the side of the lake in the Pampa Forest.<sup>13</sup> Rāma, separated from Sītā, feels tortured by the sounds, finding them ‘ear-splitting’ (*karnaśūla*).<sup>14</sup>

In a great number of passages, honey-bees seem to be sobbing or weeping softly. In the *Bhomāntaka*, an anonymous *kakawin* written in the second half

<sup>8</sup> *Brahmaṇḍapurāṇa* (130.8): ‘black as the colour of *kumbang*’s wings’ (*kadi hireng ning helar ning kumbang*).

<sup>9</sup> For *kumbang* translated ‘bumblebee’, see for example Teeuw and Robson (2005: 191, 355, 357). For Sanskrit loanword *bhramara* rendered as ‘bumblebee’, see Soewito Santoso (1986: 149).

<sup>10</sup> To give one example, *bhṛngga* is explained by a gloss in the Old Javanese *Ślokāntara* (83.4): ‘*bhṛngga* means honey-bee’ (*bhṛngga ngaranya bhramara*).

<sup>11</sup> *Pārthayajña* (21.4).

<sup>12</sup> *Hariwangśa* (2.11): ‘the humming of honey-bees was enchanting’ (*kumbangnyāngṛng arām*); *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* (2.9): ‘the drunken bees were buzzing softly’ (*bhramara matta maśabda mandra*).

<sup>13</sup> *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* (6.117).

<sup>14</sup> *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* 6.119.

of the twelfth century CE, a garden of an abandoned hermitage still attracts some bees which ‘hum and weep as they fly about, as if lamenting’.<sup>15</sup> In the *Sumanasāntaka*, a *kakawin* composed by Mpu Monaguna around 1200 CE, in his mind the young ascetic Trṇawindu, enchanted by the beauty of the divine nymph Hariṇī, fancies that her sobbing must be like the humming of honey-bees.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, women at the court of Puṣpapura (City of Flowers), abandoned by their husbands and lovers, are weeping and the poet compares their laments to the humming of honey-bees or the cries of the *cātaka* birds.<sup>17</sup> Honey-bees, ‘sobbing in their holes with muffled song’, are a common image of Old Javanese poetry.<sup>18</sup> One of the most charming passages is found in the *Bhomāntaka*. Prince Sāmba is painfully moved at the moment when he realizes that a desolate hermitage he visited had once been the place of his sojourn, where he made love with the divine nymph Yajñawatī. Talking to his ascetic friend, Sāmba expresses his sorrow in stifled speech, broken and faltering, ‘like a bee sucking flowers, such was his voice as he wept oppressed’.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, bees are said to be crying or even screaming and excited bees would emit a strong drone rather than soft humming.<sup>20</sup> In Old Javanese poetry, screaming bees are particularly common in scenes of warfare. The insects in question, however, might actually have been wasps rather than honey-bees. One such image is found in the *Bhāratayuddha*, a poem composed in 1157 CE. The Pāṇḍawa twin brothers, Nakula and Sahadewa, riding into the battle, are compared to the Twin Gods of Love (*kāma kembar*). Their assault is accompanied by a breeze and thunder which rumbles like ‘the buzzing of screaming bees’.<sup>21</sup> In another striking image in the same text, Abhimanyu, a handsome son of Arjuna, is likened to the *tawwan*, which might be a kind of wasp.<sup>22</sup> His amuck attack (in which he is slain) reminds the poet of ‘the flight of a *tawwan* striving for pollen’.<sup>23</sup> Brave Abhimanyu faces the numerous arrows of his Korawa enemies, whose bowstrings twang, ‘buzzing like honey-bees’.<sup>24</sup> The passage is clearly a reference to the motif of bees forming the string of

<sup>15</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (15.5): ‘hum and weep as they fly about, as if lamenting’ (*angreng anangis mider sawaṅ asambat*).

<sup>16</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (5.9): ‘the humming of bees’ (*panghreng nikang bhramara*).

<sup>17</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (69.3).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, *Pārthāyana* (30.28): ‘the bees sobbed in their holes with muffled song’ (*kumbang mahāngisek-isek ri kuwungnya māsret*).

<sup>19</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (16.5): ‘like a bee sucking flowers, such was his voice as he wept oppressed’ (*lwir kumbang mangisep sekar swara nirānangis katahenan*).

<sup>20</sup> In *Kakawin Rāmāyana* (2.2), ‘the season of autumn’ (*śaratsamaya*) is characterized by the presence of honey-bees ‘humming eagerly’ (*humung sadarpa*), a motif adopted from Sanskrit *kāvya*.

<sup>21</sup> *Bhāratayuddha* (9.6): ‘the buzzing of screaming bees’ (*hreng ing ṣaṭpadāwū*).

<sup>22</sup> The exact identity of Old Javanese *tawwan*/*tawon* is not known. Zoetmulder (1982: 1968), for one, glosses *tawwan*/*tawon* as ‘bee’. However, in the Middle Javanese text *Nawaruci*, *tawon* is clearly differentiated from *kumbang* and must represent an insect other than the honey-bee. In the modern language, *tawon* can refer to both bees and wasps.

<sup>23</sup> *Bhāratayuddha* (13.35): ‘the flight of a *tawwan* striving for pollen’ (*sawara tawwan aharep i manis nikang madhu*).

<sup>24</sup> *Bhāratayuddha* (13.35): ‘buzzing like honey-bees’ (*ambhramara humung*).

Kāma's 'bow of love': the love god shoots his 'arrows of flowers', envisaged as the deadly arrows of Korawas, while Abhimanyu is a wasp facing in a deadly attack the flowers of Kāma's arrows.

#### BEES, TREES, AND FLOWERS

One of the most common images in Old Javanese poetry is the attraction of honey-bees to flowers or blossoms on trees. *Kakawin* offer numerous depictions of forests and bees and their buzzing is one of the staples of these descriptions. Though there is a great number of trees and flowers which attract honey-bees, three of them – the *aśoka*, *asana* and pandanus (*paṇḍan*) – are particularly attractive to honey-bees. In Sanskrit poetry, on the other hand, the trio of favourites consists of various jasmynes, mango, and lotus (Karttunen 2009: 95). None of them, however, attains the same level of attraction to honey-bees in Old Javanese poetry: Javanese poets obviously had their own preferences when selecting plants to inhabit the world of their poems.

Let us briefly discuss the three plant species most often frequented by honey-bees in *kakawins*. The *aśoka* tree (*Saraca indica*) has magnificent red blossoms and in Old Javanese literature its younger branches are often compared to woman's supple arms. In Sanskrit *kāvya*, the *aśoka* tree is a plant typifying the spring and bees are attracted by clusters of reddish flowers (Karttunen 2009: 98). Although this motif has been adopted by Javanese poets, the association with the spring season – alien to the local perception of seasons – is generally omitted in pertinent passages. The blossoms of the *aśoka* attract both female and male honey-bees which seem to form couples, and dart playfully from one fragrant blossom to another.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, the deep love of Princess Indumatī for Prince Aja is said to flower like the blossoms of *aśoka*, 'but no honey-bee dares come near and simply abandon them'.<sup>26</sup> In yet another passage we learn that the honey-bees separated from *aśoka* blossoms at nightfall can only weep.<sup>27</sup>

The *asana* tree (*Terminalia tomentosa*), with its deep golden, fragrant blossoms, plays a prominent role in descriptions of nature and human settlements (especially hermitages) in Old Javanese poetry. The tree is, however, not even mentioned by Karttunen (2009) in his list of the plants which attract honey-bees in Sanskrit literature. The lovely colour of *asana* blossoms and their wonderful fragrance are very much liked by bees in Javanese poetry. In the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa*, the divine Māruta invites Hanumān – who is busy searching for Sītā – to rest at the slopes of Mount Menakā. The tired simian hero happily accepts the invitation and takes pleasure in listening to the honey-bees (*kumbang*) which are buzzing excitedly for 'the *asana* blossoms are just at their loveliest'.<sup>28</sup> For Javanese poets, winged honey-bees are closely associated not only with Kāma and Ratih

<sup>25</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (22.5).

<sup>26</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (106.1): 'but no bee dares come near and simply abandon them' (*bhramara tan hana wani mara kewalātilar*).

<sup>27</sup> *Pārthāyaṇa* (30.28).

<sup>28</sup> *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* (8.14): 'the *asana* blossoms are just at their loveliest' (*kembang ning asana seḍeng manojña*).

but also with the divine nymphs: they share with them the ability to fly and link the divine and human worlds. *Asana* trees often figure conspicuously in this complex love-play. In the *Sutasoma*, a *kakawin* composed by Mpu Tantular in the second half of the fourteenth century CE, honey-bees, divine nymphs, and humans figure in a charming vignette. One of the divine nymphs dispatched to seduce Prince Sutasoma, who is meditating in his hermitage, tries to entice him by her bold claim: ‘[I]n the next rebirth, when you are a honey-bee, I shall be the *asana* flower and be kissed by you in the garden’.<sup>29</sup> Zoetmulder (1974: 197) has noted one particular benefit of this beautiful tree, framing it in a poetical statement: “the *asana* is ahead of other trees in readying its blossoms to receive the first gentle raindrops upon hearing the distant thunder at the end of the dry season”. This motif is indeed common in Old Javanese texts. It is used, for example, in the *Sumanasāntaka*, in which the suitors of Princess Indumatī discuss different types of sexual partners. One of them compares a sexually unexperienced girl (*rarā*) to the *asana* tree, using a nice pun. Let me quote a translation of this passage by P. Worsley and his colleagues:

*kady anggān i sekar nikāng asana yan membang katampwan riris  
ngkāna ng ṣaṭpada miwoya yan bhramara sangjñānya n jenek tan mider*<sup>30</sup>

She is just like an *asana*-flower which blossoms when the soft rain splashes it. It is then that the bees are deceitful for they are called “*bhramara*” yet are content not to fly around.<sup>31</sup>

In the commentary to the text, Worsley et al. (2013: 488) explain that “the idea of deceit here derives from a play on the derivation of *bhramara* from the Sanskrit root *bhram*, meaning ‘to wander about’”. The bees, wanderers by nature, are happy not to wander but to come to rest on the open *asana*-flower. Elsewhere in the *Sumanasāntaka*, Prince Aja and Princess Indumatī retreat to a special pavilion to spend their wedding night, while the court people who had participated in the marriage ceremony depart for home. Secluded in the privacy of their wedding bed-chamber, ‘the two of them were left together like a bee and an *asana* flower’.<sup>32</sup>

The third plant in our trio of the plants most beloved by honey-bees is the pandanus (*Pandanus tectorius*), known also as screw-pine, a palm-like dioecious coastal plant flowering in the rainy season. In the world of *kakawin*, the honey-bee would alight upon the cheek of a fair lady because it mistakes it for a *paṇḍan* bud.<sup>33</sup> In a cliché well-known from Sanskrit *kāvya* poetry, honey-bees cannot resist the fragrant yellow flowers of *paṇḍan* and become blinded by

<sup>29</sup> *Sutasoma* (46.2): ‘[i]n the next rebirth, when you are a honey-bee, I shall be the *asana* flower and be kissed by you in the garden’ (*ring janmāntara yan madhubrata kita ngwang asana harasen ring taman*).

<sup>30</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (64.3cd). Old Javanese text taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 234).

<sup>31</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (64.3).

<sup>32</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (114.2): ‘the two of them were left together like a bee and an *asana* flower’ (*kāri sira kadi madhubratāsana*).

<sup>33</sup> *Arjunawiwāha* (33.4).



its pollen (Karttunen 2009: 99). In *kakawin*, the image of honey-bees with their eyes smarting from the pollen is found, for example, in the *Sumanasāntaka*.<sup>34</sup> It has been noted by Karttunen (2009: 99) that the images which associate pandanus and honey-bees must be a flight of poetic licence for the pandanus is pollinated by bats and birds. But this might not hold true in Java, where pandanus can be pollinated by insects. One of the most enchanting literary vignettes in the *Sumanasāntaka* depicts a poet (*kawi*), who goes to die by the seashore. His dead body, which has been bathed by the fine sea-spray, is then wrapped in the shroud of mist; the image reminds Mpu Monaguna, the author of the text, of an old pandanus plant, wept over by the honey-bees (*bhramara*) which kiss its wilting flowers.<sup>35</sup> In my understanding of this striking image, here again we find a play on the derivation of *bhramara* from the Sanskrit root *bhram*, meaning 'to wander about': honey-bees, flying around the dead plant are like mourners at a funeral who come to give the deceased a final kiss.

Apart from the three plant species discussed, in Old Javanese literature there is a range of other flowers and trees which attract honey-bees. In particular, the various kinds of lotus and waterlily are often visited by bees. *Tuñjung* and *kumuda* lotuses are particularly attractive to honey-bees.<sup>36</sup> In the *Sumanasāntaka*, Princess Indumatī, annoyed by the impetuous embraces of Aja, is scared 'like a lotus flower at the approach of a bee'.<sup>37</sup> The *campaka* (*Michelia champaka*), an evergreen tree with fragrant yellow flowers, and the *kamuning*-tree (fragrant yellow jasmine), famous for its yellow wood, as well as the *jangga* vine with its supple shoots, are also said to attract honey-bees.<sup>38</sup>

#### HONEY-BEES, WOMEN, AND KĀMA

In Sanskrit literature, honey-bees belong to the season of Kāma, which is associated with the spring. In Old Javanese poetry, honey-bees are also seen as creatures emblematic of Kāma, the god of love, and his consort, Rati. Zoetmulder (1974: 202) is rather dismissive of this type of imagery, observing: '[I]t provides the image of the lover, repeated in endless variations or, regrettably so, endless clichés'. We must admit that many rather repetitive images are indeed shared by Sanskrit and Old Javanese literary discourse, such as the meeting of Smara and Rati, said to be like that of a honey-bee and a flower.<sup>39</sup> In the *Sumanasāntaka*, the bed-pavilion in which Aja and Indumatī consummate their marriage is decorated with architectural elements, imbued with the symbolism associated with Kāma: its pillars are carved in the shape of lions and its roof is covered by honey-bees (*madhubrata*), prominent symbols

<sup>34</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (10.17). This passage is discussed in detail below.

<sup>35</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (33.9).

<sup>36</sup> *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* (2.2, 2.4).

<sup>37</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (117.4): 'like a lotus flower at the approach of a bee' (*kadi sarasije teka ning bhramara*).

<sup>38</sup> For the *kamuning* and honey-bees, see *Bhāratayuddha* (6.7), and *Kidung Harṣa Wijaya* (6.49b). For the *jangga*, see *Kṛṣṇāyana* (30.28).

<sup>39</sup> *Arjunawijaya* (20.3).

of Kāma.<sup>40</sup> The proverbial quest of a honey-bee for a flower is expressed in the *Bhomāntaka*, in which a lover's passion is said 'to be seen in the honey-bee'.<sup>41</sup> In the *Sumanasāntaka*, the infatuated King Hemānggada, who is attending the *swayambara* of Princess Indumatī, reminds the poet of 'a bee in search of flowers'.<sup>42</sup>

In Old Javanese literature sexual intercourse is sometimes metaphorically compared to an act of pollination. A very interesting image is found in the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa*, in a famous passage in which Rāwaṇa, disguised as a holy man, tries to seduce Sītā. Duplicitous Rāwaṇa compares Sītā's beauty to that of a flower 'which has been sucked by a bee – its pollen has fallen', a condition Rāwaṇa interprets as the proof that Sītā is not a virgin.<sup>43</sup> In a vignette in the *Sumanasāntaka*, already briefly mentioned above, one of Princess Indumatī's suitors compares a sexually inexperienced girl to a flower bud (*kucup ning sekar*). Let me quote a poetic translation of this passage by Worsley and his colleagues:

*yan kanyā ri hiḍep patik haji hade kahyūnanāpan raray  
tonen de nrpati ndya tang madhukarā hāne kucup ning sekar*<sup>44</sup>

It would be wrong in my opinion to desire a virgin girl, for she is still a child.  
Look my lord, how can a bee possibly enter a flower bud?<sup>45</sup>

In Old Javanese texts, a flower without a bee is like a young woman without a lover. In the *Arjunawiwāha*, a *kakawin* written by Mpu Kaṇwa in the first half of the eleventh century CE, Arjuna tries to seduce one of the divine nymphs in Indra's heaven with his honeyed words: 'There is no flower that wilts when it has been kissed by a bee'.<sup>46</sup> In the *Bhomāntaka*, Sāmba represents himself as a honey-bee (*ṣaṭpada*), who yearns for Princess Yajñawatī, whose form is said to be honeyed, and who is, in visible form, 'the essence of the essence of flowers'.<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere in the same text, Sāmba praises his beloved by saying that she is so rich in sweetness that 'the honey-bees are completely overwhelmed'.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes, poets figure as lovers who are attracted to women like honey-bees to flowers: in the *Sumanasāntaka*, Magadha's capital, Puṣpapura (City of Flowers), is as

<sup>40</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (114.1).

<sup>41</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (64.2): 'his passion is to be seen in the honey-bee' (*ring bhramara n katinghalana kūngta*).

<sup>42</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (94.2): 'like a bee in search of flowers' (*sākṣāt ṣaṭpadāmet sekar*).

<sup>43</sup> *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* (5.74): 'which has been sucked by a bee – its pollen has fallen' (*huwus inisep nikang bhramara teka sarinya rurū*).

<sup>44</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (64.2ab). Old Javanese text taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 234).

<sup>45</sup> Worsley et al. (2013: 235).

<sup>46</sup> *Arjunawiwāha* (33.5): 'There is no flower which wilts when it has been kissed by a bee' (*tanora kusumālume harasen ing bhramara śaca nirān parigraha*). Old Javanese text, and English translation, taken from Robson (2008).

<sup>47</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (26.2): 'the essence of the essence of flowers' (*sāri ni sāri ning kusuma*).

<sup>48</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (26.17): 'the honey-bees cannot manage to take delivery' (*agati panarima ning madhubrata*).

a place in which *kawi* constantly gather.<sup>49</sup> We can see that even Javanese (and Sundanese) toponymy was influenced by the image and lore of honey-bees: in the *Bujangga Manik*, a poem written in Old Sundanese in the late-fifteenth century CE, the eponymous hero surveys the countryside seen from the top Mount Papandayan. Among a great number of peaks, he also spies ‘Mount *Kumbang*, pillar of the Maruyung area’.<sup>50</sup> In the *Bhomāntaka*, the scent and pollen emitted by the trees which line the roads to Dwārawatī entice crowds of people: ‘the humble came out like bees in search of pleasure’.<sup>51</sup> To conclude this section, I would like to note that some literary motifs which are commonly associated with honey-bees in Sanskrit literature but are completely unknown in Old Javanese poetry.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, there are a score of images in Old Javanese *kakawin*s which are clearly not based on Sanskrit models and reflect the Javanese court world and its social and cultural values. In the next section, we turn to these literary vignettes and discuss some of them in more detail.

#### HONEY-BEES AND JAVANESE COURTS: GAMELAN, FINE DRESS, GROOMING PRACTICES, AND PALANQUINS

The literary imagery associated with honey-bees is often based on life in the Javanese courts and their culture. In *kakawin*, honey-bees and their behaviour can be compared to court dress, grooming and beautification, palanquins used to transport elite ladies, court music and musicians. Honey-bees also figure in depictions of royal gardens. The frequency with which honey-bees and their symbolism yield to the description of courts is perhaps a consequence of the “foreign” literary motif that the honey-bee might have represented for the court audience: like imported Indian textiles, the motif of the honey-bee, for which so many Sanskrit loans exist, could be perceived as a “status marker”. Insects are generally underrepresented in Old Javanese literature (Jákl 2012), and the honey-bee – for which a number of Sanskrit loans exist – is a striking exception. Along with adopting and adapting Sanskrit models, Javanese poets would often come up with imagery which reflected the local social and cultural environment. In the *Sumanasāntaka*, the gamelan ensemble (*genḍing*) played to accompany the arrival of King Hemānggada at the court is said to be ‘not violent but as soft as the humming of bees sipping nectar from all kinds of

<sup>49</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (69.3).

<sup>50</sup> *Bujangga Manik* (1192-1193): ‘Mount *Kumbang*, pillar of the Maruyung area’ (*itu ta na gunung kumbang ta(ng)geran alas maruyung*).

<sup>51</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (1.12): ‘the humble came out like bees in search of pleasure’ (*ikāṅg atpadānatpada mangusir inak*).

<sup>52</sup> One literary motif which is conspicuously absent in Old Javanese court poetry is that of elephants in rut attracting bees which swarm around their temples, leaving their favourite trees. (Karttunen 2009: 107), who has discussed this theme in detail, notes that “[o]ne would think that the insects attracted to the temporal glands of elephants were rather flies, but flies in general do not belong among the images of poetry”. In my view, a rather negative view of elephants in *kakawin* poetry, in which demonic features are often ascribed to them, might have triggered the reluctance of Javanese poets to explore pachyderms in their love imagery.

flowers' (*tan karkaśālwān bhramara kaḍepanyāngiseṣ sarwasāri*).<sup>53</sup> In Sanskrit *kāvya*, on the other hand, the notes of flutes are typically compared to the humming of bees. Jaap Kunst (1973 I: 110) has persuasively demonstrated that metal idiophones characterized Javanese court music as early as in the twelfth century CE. Apart from metal idiophones, stringed or plucked instruments seems to have been associated with honey-bees and their humming. In the *Ghaṭotkacāśraya*, a *kakawin* composed by Mpu Panuluh in the second, half of the twelfth century CE, sounds emitted by honey-bees are praised in a long description of Kṛṣṇa's capital Dwārawatī. Honey-bees, denoted *kumbang*, frequent the trees which are just coming into bloom in the royal garden:

*kumbangnyānghreng arum tinūt i pangawat ning mrak ring antahpuri  
kady āsyang-syanga dewa kinnara panawwangnyālaleh suswara*<sup>54</sup>

The bees were humming sweetly, answered by the preludes of the peacocks in the inner apartments,  
It was as if they were summoning the divine musicians, their cries were so lovely and melodious.<sup>55</sup>

From other texts we know that the divine musicians (*dewa kinnara*) used a kind of stringed instrument known in Old Javanese as a *kinnara*. Kunst (1968: 19) has identified *kinnara* as the bar-zither, a musical instrument which is depicted on Borobudur. A passage in the *Hariwangśa* (A), an anonymous *kakawin* composed in the sixteenth century CE, also associates the buzzing of honey-bees with the plucked instruments: 'the drone of the plucked instruments resembled the [sound emitted by the] sucking bees' (*panghreng ning gupitānamar pangiseṣ ing madhubrata*).<sup>56</sup>

Some of the religious figures documented in pre-Islamic Javanese courts are compared to honey-bees. In the *Sumanasāntaka*, the Śaiwa and Bauddha priests in the retinue of Prince Aja pronounce mantras upon the entry of the party into the city of Widarbha. The priests are said to have large bellies and pronounced beards, not unlike the religious figures depicted on Javanese temple monuments. The court priests intoning mantras remind Mpu Monagaṇa of honey-bees and their humming:

*humung tekap ira n panguccaraṇa mantra kadi madhukarāngisis humaliwat*<sup>57</sup>

The resonant intoning of their mantras was like the sound of honey-bees passing by in the open air.

The passage can be read as a humorous variation on the well-known motif of honey-bees and flowers: the agitated priests could be a metaphor for excited

<sup>53</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (53.3).

<sup>54</sup> *Ghaṭotkacāśraya* (2.6cd). Old Javanese text taken from Robson (2016: 32).

<sup>55</sup> Robson (2016: 33).

<sup>56</sup> *Hariwangśa* (A) (8.3).

<sup>57</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (25.5d). Old Javanese text taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 130).

honey-bees; the proverbial fragrant flowers would then be the court ladies on the observation terraces, eager to watch Prince Aja enter the city. Elsewhere in the same text, one of Princess Indumati's royal suitors envisages her standing on the unfolded petals of a pandanus (*puḍak*), as she is being 'blessed by the honey-bees' (*inastwaken ing bhramara*). Once again, the honey-bees in question seem to stand for male priests who bestow the blessing.<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere in the same text, another group of ritual specialists, the enigmatic *śangkapāṇi*, who are conducting their rituals on a paved terrace beneath a large *aśoka* tree, are associated with honey-bees. To avoid sprays of sanctified water administered by the *śangkapāṇi*-priests, bees (*bhramara*) 'hide behind a screen of lotus petals' (*atawing-tawing i lawe-lawö nikang sarasija*).<sup>59</sup>

In several texts, the ladies-in-waiting and female attendants (*gunḍik*) of Javanese royal ladies are sometimes likened to honey-bees swarming around their lady. This is a reflection of an interesting concept of a realm ruled by the queen in a similar fashion to the way the queen bee "rules" a bee colony or beehive. This motif, which is unknown in Sanskrit *kāvya* poetry, must represent a Javanese innovation. In the *Kṛṣṇāyana*, a *kakawin* composed by Mpu Triguṇa in the thirteenth century CE, the female attendants (*gunḍik*) clustered around Princess Rukmiṇi remind the poet of bees. The lower wrap-up garment (*tapih*) worn by the female attendants is compared to the wings of honey-bees:

*helar ning kumbang yogya tapiha nikā pantes angene*<sup>60</sup>

The wings of honey-bees would be fitted to serve as their wrap-up dress, used in a style.

Obsession with fine dress, prominent in Old Javanese *kakawin*, is reflected in this literary vignette in a striking visual image. The image seems to be based on a particular style of arranging a large sheet of cloth (*kain*) around the lower part of the body: the dress seems as if it is forming two distinct "wings", not unlike the folded wings of a honey-bee at rest. This style of "winged" court dress is actually known in depictions on reliefs at Candi Panataran in East Java, dated to the fourteenth century CE.<sup>61</sup> I am tempted to speculate that the fine texture of veins which is typical for the wings of honey-bees, might have reminded the poet of the folds and creases in the *tapih*. We have seen above that the black, shiny wings of honey-bees are mentioned in Old Javanese literature (for example, in the *Arjunawiwāha*), conjuring up the metallic, black shine of the court dress worn by the *gunḍik*.<sup>62</sup> The association between the fine cloth and the delicate, veined wings of honey-bees is a well-established trope in the Old Javanese poetry composed later in Bali. For example, in the *Kāṇḍhawawanadahana*,

<sup>58</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (87.2).

<sup>59</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (22.5).

<sup>60</sup> *Kṛṣṇāyana* (33.6d). Old Javanese text taken from Soewito Santoso (1986: 155).

<sup>61</sup> Three women whose dress is arranged in this style are part of an entourage of a noble lady carried in a palanquin, depicted on Panataran. For this relief, see A.J. Bernet Kempers (1976: 263, Figure 198). The lower garment (*tapih*) is open at the bottom, forming two distinct "wings".

<sup>62</sup> *Arjunawiwāha* (3.11).

a *kakawin* written in Lombok in 1854 (Helen Creese 1999: 80), a parasol (*payung*) in use at the court is said to resemble ‘the wings of honey-bees’ (*apayung lar hali*).<sup>63</sup> Another image based on the association of dress and bees is found in the *Bhomāntaka*, in which the poet describes an abandoned forest hermitage. In the past it had been a beautiful place, occupied by a happy couple of ascetics, Dharmadewa and Yajñawatī. To emphasize the pitiful mood of the desolate hermitage, the poet introduces the image of bees which come to visit the place in search of flowers. They remind him of people who wearing second-hand clothing made from coarse fibre:

*mwang tang dwirepha milu kāsihan mabasahan kadut lewas awūk*<sup>64</sup>

And the bees are also pitiful, wearing a lower garment of rough fibre, old, and threadbare.

How should this image be read? The meaning of Old Javanese *basahan*, rendered here as ‘lower garment’, is not entirely clear.<sup>65</sup> The evidence available suggests that a *basahan* was mainly worn by men, apart from instances where a woman uses a *basahan* of her husband or lover as a token of their intimacy. As noted by Worsley et al. (2013: 447), “the woman’s *tapih* was exchanged for the man’s *basahan* between lovers”.<sup>66</sup> This raises the possibility that threadbare *basahan* would mark the gift of garment by a beloved person who had passed away, but the garment was still valued and used in memory of that person. In *Sumanasāntaka* (81.2) we encounter another element of Javanese court dress associated with honey-bees. In this interesting vignette, the buzzing of honey-bees reminds Mpu Monaguṇa of the clinking sounds emitted by metal belts (*hambulungan*) worn by female attendants (*gunḍik*) and servants (*kaka-kaka*) of Princess Indumatī on the occasion of her wedding. Let me quote the translation of this passage by Worsley and his colleagues:

*kweh ning gunḍik nira mwang kaka-kaka rumarāngasturi mrik wanginya  
lagy ātangkis humung hambulungan i tali kenyanamar ṣaṭpada stri*<sup>67</sup>

Her many attendants and young female servants, in the full bloom of their youth, were perfumed as fragrantly as musk.

With the metal belts about their *kain* tinkling loudly they resembled female bees.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *Kāṇḍhawawanadahana* (13.28).

<sup>64</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (15.6d). Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 170).

<sup>65</sup> Taking into account the fact that the word is not attested to in the modern language, Zoetmulder (1982: 221) glosses *basahan* cautiously as ‘lower garment (*kampuh*, etc.) Originally: the piece of cloth which is not taken off while bathing?’ For Zoetmulder, *basahan* (Old Javanese *basah*: ‘wet’) represents a piece of dress similar to the better-known *patelesan*. This interpretation has been accepted by other scholars. Worsley et al. (2013: 447), for example, interpret *basahan* as ‘a garment covering the lower body.’ Aditia Gunawan (2019) interprets the *basahan* mentioned in Old Sundanese texts as ‘a type of cloth used to cover the body when bathing’.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, *Sumanasāntaka* (136.1), where Indumatī uses Aja’s *basahan* as a sleeping garment.

<sup>67</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* 81.2bc. Old Javanese text taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 254).

<sup>68</sup> Worsley et al. (2013: 255).

Apart from the court dress and music, honey-bees are compared to a typical transport means used by Javanese court ladies in pre-modern period: the palanquin. *Bhomāntaka* (57.2) charmingly weaves together the motifs adopted from Sanskrit literature, such as the concept of 'spring' (*basanta*), with the depictions of Javanese material objects and artefacts, such as wooden palanquins and the colorful court dress worn by the participants of a royal 'pleasure trip':

*de ning kweh nira sang watek yadu sesök ikang lebuḥ agöng  
lwir guntur kusumānurun ri seḍeng ing basantadiwasa  
abhrā ng wastra putih kuning dadu biru mirah paḍa mekar  
akweh ḍampa wulung katon kadi ta kumbanganya kahilī<sup>69</sup>*

Because of the multitude of the Yadu soldiers the major square was crowded;  
Like a thundering torrent of flowers coming down in springtime,  
Their dress was bright like flowers: white, yellow, pink, blue, and red.  
And many were the black palanquins, looking like the honey-bees flying in a stream.

Court ladies carried in 'black palanquins' (*ḍampa wulung*), depicted in the last line of the stanza, remind the poet of 'honey-bees flying in a stream' (*kumbanganya kahilī*). Numerous palanquins, carried on the shoulders of palanquin-bearers in a slow, undulating movement, seem to remind the poet of a swarm of honey-bees flying close to the ground, following one another. As noted by Teeuw and Robson (2005: 636), *wulung* can mean 'black' as well as 'dark blue' in Old Javanese.

We have already seen that Javanese poets often evoke the black colour typical of honey-bee wings, so that the colour described as *wulung* in the passage quoted above must be black or blackish as well. This information is of some importance for the cultural history of the means of transport used in pre-modern Java. The phrase *ḍampa wulung* (black palanquins) is also attested to in the *Sumanasāntaka*.<sup>70</sup> In my view, black refers to the colour of textile curtains or awnings rather than to the black paint of the wooden body of the palanquin. It seems that one of the common types of palanquins used in pre-modern Java consisted of a simple wooden frame or box covered by textiles.<sup>71</sup>

Another facet of the court life which is sometimes reflected in metaphorical images based on the behavior of honey-bees are the grooming and beautification of court ladies and their elaborate hairdressing. In the *Sumanasāntaka*, the application of kohl (*sipat*) and other cosmetic paints, applied using a special stick (*sadak*), are associated with the world of honey-bees. We know from several literary vignettes that the application of kohl might have been a painful

<sup>69</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (57.2). Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 356).

<sup>70</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (159.4). The colour denoted *wulung* in Old Javanese must have been popular in ancient Java. Zoetmulder (1974: 134) has noted that *karas* (a type of writing support used by poets and possibly scribes) appears to have been carried in a cover or a case of black cloth (*kasang wulung*), so that a poet is described as 'the man with the black *kasang*'.

<sup>71</sup> For a depiction of this type of palanquin, see Bernet Kempers (1976: 263, Figure 198).

experience if the stick happened to touch the eye. At the very least, it would cause the eye to smart.<sup>72</sup> In the *Sumanasāntaka*, Princess Indumatī uses a powder (*hawu-hawu*) for her spiritual protection before she retires to the courtyard to write a piece of poetry. Mpu Monaguna draws a parallel between the pain caused by a careless, or possibly too-passionate, handling of the sadak-stick, and the pain endured by honey-bees who suffer from the pollen adhering to their eyes:

*anglūd ry ambek ira n rimang tangis ikang bhramara kalilipen saḍek hrebuk<sup>73</sup>*

The sound of weeping honey-bees, their eyes smarting from pollen, attacked her wistful heart.

Several Old Javanese passages explore metaphors which reflect the hair-dressing practices of court ladies. We have already seen that beautiful women are said to attract honey-bees that would mistake them for flowers. Sometimes, perfume or the scent of flower ornaments decorating an elaborate coiffure are said to be the reason for this attraction. For example, in a charming vignette in *Bhomāntaka* (56.5), in which court ladies discuss different types of lovers and prospective husbands, the flowers adorning their coiffures would attract honey-bees by their strong odour:

*endah rūpa niki n telas masekar arja ri patah atitah bintelö  
māmbö rümnya sumār nimitta nika kumbangen alulut i gandha ning pipi<sup>74</sup>*

They looked beautiful when they had put attractive flowers in the strands of their hair, arranged in the *bintelö* style,  
And their perfume spread fragrantly, so that they had trouble with “honey-bees”,  
who were in love with the perfume of their cheeks.

The passage gives us a rare insight into the hair-dressing practices of elite Javanese women: the term *patah* ‘hair-band’ indicates that their elaborate coiffures must have been secured and reinforced using textile hair-bands. But what exactly is the referent of the Old Javanese term *kumbangen*: winged insects or rather human lovers? The form *kumbangen*, rendered here ‘they had trouble with honey-bees’, is difficult. Zoetmulder (1982: 921) glosses it tentatively as ‘to be visited by a *kumbar* (lover)’, while Teeuw and Robson (2005: 355) translate the word as ‘they had trouble with bumblebees’. In my view, Zoetmulder’s interpretation is a better reflection of the metaphorical

<sup>72</sup> An example is found in *Ghaṭotkacāśraya* (5.6cd): “The people of the interior sat up by lamp-light all night long, to put on eye-shadow, dress and arrange their hair. Some shrieked when jabbed with an eye-shadow stick as someone jostled their arm while they were applying it” (Robson 2016: 51). Old Javanese text, taken from Robson (2016: 50), reads: *wwang ri dalem saratri madamar paḍāsipatanāhyasāngdani patah / akrak ikang waneh katujah ing sadak mata niki n kasinggul asipat*.

<sup>73</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* 10.17b. Old Javanese text and translation taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 90, 91).

<sup>74</sup> *Bhomāntaka* 56.5cd. Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 354).



meaning of “honey-bees” in this passage: the ‘honey-bees’ stand for the lovers the ladies hope to attract, not unlike the way fragrant flowers attract honey-bees. Another passage in the *Bhomāntaka* suggests that the imagery based on honey-bee lore must have been employed in riddles and allusions, a device which was always popular in the Javanese court speech register. When her servant Saharṣā announces to Yajñawatī that Sāmba has arrived, the Princess answers elusively, although she is filled with passion to meet her beloved:

*nāhan pājar nira ndi n kusuma kaka mapet patya māngungsya kumbang  
anghing yan wwanten ing campaka mekara sakeng nīradāku n sarāga*<sup>75</sup>

She said: “How could a flower, sister, seek its death by pursuing the honey-bee? But if it is there at the *campaka*, I shall bloom because of the rain, and shall share the same passion”.

In the next stanza we learn that Saharṣā is puzzled by the allusion (*warṇa*): as if Yajñawatī were sheltering behind a double meaning (*mangrṃwāsenōtan*).<sup>76</sup> We could not help to notice that in all the passages discussed above, the images based on the motif of the honey-bee are associated with women rather than men even though we have seen above that in Sanskrit poetry, and also in a number of Old Javanese passages, women are typically likened to flowers visited by honey-bees who represent men. This leads us to the conclusion that, in the court environment, the image of a bee colony must have been viewed as a reflection of the court.

#### BEEKEEPING IN JAVA BEFORE 1500 CE?

The Javanese must have been interacting with bees for thousands of years, robbing bees of their honey and wax. One of the enigmas of Javanese linguistic history is the fact that we still do not know what the native Austronesian term for ‘honey’ was: *madhu* in Old Javanese textual discourse is a Sanskrit loanword. In Old Javanese literature, *madhu* can refer to bee honey and it also denotes all kinds of sweet, syrupy substances, as well as liquefied palm sugar. A realistic description of honey collected from wild bees is found, for example, in the *Sumanasāntaka*:

*titis ni madhu ning madhubrata bangun lenga wangi humaḍang haneng śilā*<sup>77</sup>

Traces of honey left by the bees were like drops of fragrant oil ready for her there on the rocks.<sup>78</sup>

We can be sure that robbing bees of honey is an ancient practice which certainly predates the existence of written records in Java. However, there has been little evidence of the antiquity of beekeeping in Java and elsewhere in

<sup>75</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (19.7cd). Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 190).

<sup>76</sup> *Bhomāntaka* (19.8a).

<sup>77</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (2.2a). Old Javanese text taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 64).

<sup>78</sup> Worsley et al. (2013: 65).

maritime Southeast Asia. In her authoritative global history of beekeeping, Crane (1983, 2000) cannot find any textual evidence for beehives which would predate the colonial period. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Th. Stamford Raffles (1830: 61) reported that foreigners rather than native Javanese practised beekeeping which he considered to be rather primitive:

Honey and wax are produced by three species of bees, inhabiting the largest forests, but they are both collected in very inconsiderable quantities. Bees are occasionally domesticated by the Arabs and Indians near the large settlements, but never by the natives.

Some other authors have been less dismissive and inform us that Javanese did actually practise beekeeping. In 1864, Hoogeveen described how the Asian honey-bee (*Apis cerana*) colonies were kept in hives (*glodhok*) in Bandung. Slightly later, in 1876, Veth wrote that *Apis cerana* in similar hives in Java and noted that one could yield twelve combs of honey a year. Furthermore, the beeswax produced was sold in small blocks in local markets. In the 1870s, some 5,800 people in Purworejo kept bees as a sideline, using a *glodhok* or a clay pot. In existing hives, young queens were killed to prevent swarming. Honey was harvested every six weeks in the monsoon season by cutting out half the combs and brood or larvae were removed and eaten (Beetsma 1977).<sup>79</sup> Crane (2000: 278) claims that the traditional Javanese *glodhok* was a horizontal hive made from a log cut into two parts lengthways and reassembled. In 1931, Franssen described several other types of hives from Java.<sup>80</sup> Crane (2000: 315) observes that “[h]orizontal cylindrical hives of *Apis cerana* were commonly hung on the wall of a single-story dwelling house or outhouse” and gives examples from Nepal, Japan, China, North Vietnam, and Bali. This was the way hives were sheltered and protected. According to Cooper Schouten, David Lloyd, and Heather Lloyd (2019), beekeepers in Java (and on Nusa Penida) reported that hives were kept as high up as 10 metres in trees, to prevent theft. The hives were brought down for inspection using a bamboo pole with a hook. Crane (2000: 315, Figure 32.2d) has reproduced a photograph taken in Bali in 1972 of horizontal hives of *Apis cerana*, hanging under the eaves of a house.

Old Javanese texts can help us to trace the written history of beekeeping in the region to the twelfth century CE. The fact that even rudimentary

<sup>79</sup> The practice of eating the brood is already documented in the Old Javanese *Deśawarṇana* (89.5).

<sup>80</sup> Around Banten, Franssen encountered beehives consisting of a hollowed horizontal log, some 50 to 100 cm long and 10 to 25 cm across, whose ends were closed off by wooden boards or half coconut shells; bees entered through any the spaces around them (Crane 2000). Today, beehives take many forms, from pots and bamboo hives to hollowed logs, removable frames and top-bar hives (Bradbeer 2009). But the most common type of beehive has traditionally been the log hive, often constructed of a segment of a hollowed coconut trunk, approximately 1 metre long. These hives had openings at either end which were sealed using any freely available materials, such as timber. In Java, log hives were observed suspended horizontally in trees, under house eaves and on timber stands. This practice has been documented in many parts of Asia.

beekeeping arrived late to Southeast Asia might be attributed to various reasons. Java is rich in natural sources of sugar and Old Javanese inscriptions and literary texts testify that solid palm sugar was commonly used as a sweetening agent. In pre-Islamic Java, as well as in pre-modern Cambodia, bee honey was used as a medicine rather than a sweetening agent (Jákl 2015; Sharrock and Jacques 2017). We have seen above that the numerous reports of the horizontal hives which were hung under the eaves of a roof show that this type of beehive must have been well-known in Java and Bali in the nineteenth century. Strikingly, these modern references remind us of various Old Javanese passages in which honey-bees are said to aggregate close to the eaves below the roof of a building. One of these passages is found in the *Sumanasāntaka*. In it honey-bees (*kumbang*) swarm around the eaves of the *piḍuḍukan* pavilion in which the wedding rituals of Princess Indumatī are conducted:

*genternyāngdadi kumbang edran anangis hana lengeng angurambat ing teto*<sup>81</sup>

The thunder was composed of the crying of circling bees. Some, in state of ecstasy, crept over the wooden eaves.<sup>82</sup>

We know that wedding rituals in pre-Islamic Java were closely associated with the cult of Kāma, the god of love, and his consort, Ratih, whose depictions decorated wedding pavilions as well as marriage beds, at least in the elite environment. This literary vignette has certainly been influenced by the association of honey-bees with Kāma. At the same time, we can read this passage as one of the earliest references to the practice of beekeeping in Java. The earliest literary vignette which might refer to beekeeping is found in the *Bhāratayuddha*, in the description of the lovemaking of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Queen Bhānumatī. In stanza (4.10), a garden, which is clearly a part of the queen's apartments and in which the bed-chamber is situated, is described at the moment of sunset:

*manuk amilihi kaywan ring tāman pakulemana  
kadi wayuh amagantāken kāsih kalulutana  
madhukara humung anghreng mār munggw ing wiwara nika  
awuwus ing angamer strī mahyun manglukarana ken*<sup>83</sup>

Birds, choosing trees in which to spend the night in the garden,  
Resembled husbands going from one lover to another seeking the satisfaction  
of love.

The soft humming of honey-bees which were already in their hive  
Was like the murmuring of an affectionate lover, who strives to undress his  
beloved.

<sup>81</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* 40.2d. Old Javanese text taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 180).

<sup>82</sup> Worsley et al. (2013: 181).

<sup>83</sup> *Bhāratayuddha* 4.10. Old Javanese text taken from Suryo Supomo (1993: 61).

It is clear that the honey-bees, ‘which were already in their hive’, are a metaphor for King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who has entered the bed-chamber of Queen Bhānumatī. Suryo Supomo (1993: 193), the editor of the *Bhāratayuddha*, has interpreted the phrase *madhukara* [...] *munggw ing wiwara nika* as ‘bees in their hives’. Now, Old Javanese *wiwara* (cleft, hole), a loanword from Sanskrit, can refer to a nest of wild bees constructed in a rock cavity. However, it can also be interpreted as ‘beehive’: a type of horizontal hive made from a bamboo log cut lengthways into two parts and reassembled, with its prominent ‘cleft’ between the two parts through which the bees can enter the hive. A literary motif of the collecting of honey of wild bees from rock cavities is found in several Sanskrit texts, but it is relatively rare. John D. Smith (2002: 316-324), for one, has discussed in detail the motif of ‘the honey and the precipice’ in the *Mahābhārata*, in which the use of hives is never hinted at. Old Javanese *wiwara* does have a semantic parallel in modern Javanese *glodhogan*, which means ‘hole, hollow’, while *glodhog* denotes ‘wooden beehive’ (Robson and Wibisono 2002: 255). In my view, the narrative logic of the passage quoted above makes it highly improbable that nest(s) of wild bees would have been tolerated in the garden of a royal residence. In my view, it is no coincidence that the passage is part of a longer section (stanzas 4.7-6.7) which has no parallel in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* on which the Old Javanese *kakawin* is modelled (Suryo Supomo 1993: 15). The Javanese author felt free to add details reflecting Javanese life, providing us with what might be the earliest literary reference to the practice of beekeeping in maritime Southeast Asia. Beekeeping offers numerous advantages over the opportunistic collecting of wild honey: placing bees in hives enables bees to be moved and kept close to households so that they can be managed more easily. Another interesting reference is found in Old Javanese *Wṛhaspatitattwa* (14.40), in which a phrase ‘the house of bees’ (*umah ning tawan*) could indicate some form of beekeeping. Another early allusion to the practice of beekeeping is attested in the *Sumanasāntaka*. In a lovely metaphor, Mpu Monaguṇa compares Princess Indumatī to a beautiful flower who is uncertain which bee from the beehive to choose as her husband. Let me quote the translation of this passage by Worsley and his colleagues:

*dolāyamāna ri turung ni manah niresi*  
*lunghāmilih-milih i jalwa nire narendra*  
*himper sekar mider amet bhramare kuwungnya*<sup>84</sup>

She vacillated, for she had not yet fallen in love.  
 She walked away, considering which of the kings she would choose as her spouse.  
 She was like a flower that turns around in search of a bee in its hive.<sup>85</sup>

In this metaphor, Mpu Monaguṇa introduces an image based on a bee colony which is represented as if consisting of the suitors (‘male bees’) of Princess Indumatī. The phrase *bhramare kuwungnya*, translated by Worsley

<sup>84</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* 96.3bcd. Old Javanese text taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 270).

<sup>85</sup> Worsley et al. (2013: 271).

and his colleagues as ‘a bee in its hive’, can actually refer to a nest of wild honey-bees. Zoetmulder (1982: 943), for one, glosses *kuwung* as ‘cavity, hollow, hole’. But the setting of the scene at the royal court allows the possibility that a true beehive rather than a nest of wild bees is implied. We have seen that, in a number of places in the *Sumanasāntaka*, the maids and ladies-in-waiting of Princes Indumatī are compared to honey-bees. As a consequence of this narrative approach, the Princess must have been perceived as the queen bee by the Javanese courtiers.<sup>86</sup> Yet, nowhere in Old Javanese texts do we find the term ‘queen bee’ or ‘queen of bees’, but we do encounter the designation ‘queen of the flowers’.<sup>87</sup> In the *Sumanasāntaka*, Mpu Monaguṇa devises a unique narrative imagery to deal with the ‘reversed’ hierarchy associated with the ‘marriage-by-choice’ (*swayambara*): Indumatī, represented as a flower, actively seeks her husband, who is represented as a male bee, out of the many ‘bees’ available to her. To appreciate a novelty of this imagery, we should note that, in the Indic world and many other parts of the pre-modern world, people believed that a bee colony was ruled by the “king”: the queen bee was typically misidentified as a male bee (Maria Deliyannis, Evangelia Tsatsarou, and Georgia Tsapi 2018: 56; Christopher Hollingsworth 2005). Karttunen (2009: 114) has discussed at some length the Indian idea that the bee colony or beehive is ruled by the king. Let me quote his account in full:

The ruler of the beehive was called the “king” of bees, instead of the queen that biology has shown her to be. The mere term *bhṛṅgarāja* is not sufficient evidence for the idea of a bee king as it has also another meaning [...], but see, e.g. *Praśnopaniṣad* 2, 4, where the (swarming) bees follow the bee king whether he goes up or down [...]. In the Bhāg, the bee king is called *bhṛṅgādhipa* (3, 15, 18) and *madhuwatapati* (3, 16, 20). The same error, king instead of queen, was also committed in the West.

In Sanskrit written drama, the associations of honey-bees, Kāma and eroticism is the reason some of the queen’s attendants bear personal names derived from terms for bees. Karttunen (2009: 109, n. 56) notes that such names are very rare, while the names based on cuckoos are the staple of Sanskrit drama. Among the bee-names in Sanskrit plays we find Madhukarakā in Bhāsa’s famous play *Daridrācārudatta* (1.11) and one Madhukarikā in Kālidāsa’s *Mālavikāgnimitram*. It is noteworthy that Princess Indumatī’s personal attendant in the Old Javanese *Sumanasāntaka* is called Madhudaka.<sup>88</sup> To conclude this article, I would like to pose a rather speculative question: can it be that the situation of political instability, possibly the result of a lack of a male heir, led Mpu Monaguṇa to employ a singular, unique imagery based on a bee colony or beehive as a reflection of the Javanese court? In

<sup>86</sup> The term “queen bee” typically refers to an adult, mated female which lives in a honey-bee hive. It is a female bee with fully developed reproductive organs; she is usually the mother of most, or even all, of the bees living in the beehive.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, the *Sumanasāntaka*.

<sup>88</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (107.2). It would be interesting to look for possible parallels between Old Javanese texts and Sanskrit drama, but it is outside of the scope of this study.

stanza 42.11 Mpu Monaguṇa, sensing the dilemma she faces, takes side with Princess Indumatī:

*āpan tan hana ngūni kewala sirāmungari pinakakabwatan hañar*<sup>89</sup>

For never before had a *swayambara* been held. She was the very first to be burdened with it.<sup>90</sup>

In their commentary to the text, Worsley et al. (2013: 480) note that the first description of the *swayambara* in Old Javanese literature is that of Sitā in the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa*, a text composed more than two centuries before the *Sumanasāntaka*. Yet, the urgency of Mpu Monaguṇa in emphasizing the uniqueness of this moment is clearly expressed in the *kakawin*: the *swayambara* of Indumatī actually forms a core narrative of the *Sumanasāntaka*, whereas in the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* the *swayambara* is just mentioned briefly. Or are we just confronted with the exceptional skills in the observation of nature on the part of Mpu Monaguṇa, who understood that a honey-bee colony is ruled by the queen bee rather than the "bee king"?

#### CONCLUSION

This article has discussed literary representations of the honey-bee in Old Javanese court poems (*kakawins*). Known under its indigenous name *kumbang*, as well as a score of Sanskrit loanwords, the honey-bee appears in many descriptions of nature and it figures prominently in metaphors used to describe the court culture. Though depictions of honey-bees have often been adopted from Sanskrit literary models, reading of *kakawin* reveals that Javanese poets were good observers of nature and they often introduced fresh imagery which has no parallels in Sanskrit texts. This article has discussed four themes in which honey-bees figure prominently. Firstly, bees and the sounds they emit: their humming and buzzing. Secondly, the attraction of honey-bees to flowers and the blossoms of trees. In the third section, the close association between honey-bees and Kāma, the god of love, is discussed in detail. It is shown that in *kakawin*, honey-bees often figure in metaphors which gloss the daily lives of Javanese elite women: their dress, grooming, means of transport, the court music they enjoy, and the ceremonies they undergo. As emblems of the god of love, honey-bees figure prominently in descriptions of wedding rituals and sexual life. In the last section I demonstrate that, in two Old Javanese *kakawin* dated to the mid-twelfth and early-thirteenth century CE, respectively, poets introduce an image of a beehive. Along with visual depictions of beehives from the twelfth-century Cambodia, the two Old Javanese references provide us with the earliest evidence of beekeeping in Southeast Asia.

<sup>89</sup> *Sumanasāntaka* (42.11c). Old Javanese text taken from Worsley et al. (2013: 186).

<sup>90</sup> Worsley et al. (2013: 187).

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