

Fact or fiction? Magical Realism and Mpu Prapañca's Fourteenth Century
kakawin Deśawarṇana.

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The publication of a study of Mpu Monaguṇa's epic poem, *Sumanasāntaka* (Death by a Sumanasa Flower) in 2013 is an opportune moment to comment on what a reading of this poem and others of the same epic genre might contribute to our understanding of the history of cosmological ideas in Java in the period between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries. Whatever the value these epic poems have for our understanding of the literary culture of Java and its peoples, they are also potentially a rich source of a knowledge of how the Javanese themselves imagined the immediate environment in which they lived and the larger cosmological order of which it was part.

Identifying the categories of space in which the narrative action of epic *kakawin* works are set, describing their characteristics and ascertaining the narrative and conceptual relationship between them is on the whole a straight forward business. If we are to use these epic poems as historical sources providing us with a knowledge of how Javanese thought about their Javanese environment in the ninth to fifteenth centuries, what are we to make of these descriptions of space? What indeed is Javanese at all about stories derived from the great Sanskrit epic works in which protagaonists bearing Indian names inhabit a landscape in which the mountains and rivers, cities and towns bear Indian names? And where is the reality in stories which tell fantastic tales about divine nymphs coursing the heavens between heaven and earth to seduce human ascetics from their meditation, or about a *gandharwa* prince, cursed to inhabit the form of a giant rutting elephant for bathing in the Narmadā river upstream from a priest and whom a human prince releases from the course with an arrow fired from his bow. These questions raise two issues: the Indian and fictional character of Javanese epic poems.