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# Wild Bull Fight

Asian Studies Institute Translation Paper 3

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ISSN: 1174-7676

ISBN: 0-475-11068-4

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At quarter past midnight Umar Salim awoke, his body perspiring. To the best of his recollection he had dozed off at about ten o'clock. But he hadn't slept soundly; bizarre dreams had disturbed him. His wife, he saw, still lay beside him. Not wishing to wake her, he carefully peeled back the blanket and, just as carefully, got out of bed. After slipping on his sandals, he opened the bedroom door and went out. The sensation of thirst in his throat had grown more insistent. Umar Salim dragged his feet towards the kitchen. He grabbed a glass and poured himself some water from the refrigerator, finishing it off in one go. Then he turned on a lamp in the living room and sat on the sofa to ponder the dream he had just had.

In his dream he found himself in some indistinct location; it had the feel of a busy city. Suddenly, several wild buffalo appeared. They came from the direction of the urban bustle and chased him, as though chasing a bullfighter. The buffalo had black hides and black horns; their behaviour was savage. He tried to run as fast as he could, summoning all his strength to save himself from these beasts that were running amok, but with no luck. His feet stuck to the ground. He could barely lift them. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw the buffalo coming closer, closer. He tried to shout at the top of his lungs, but no one was prepared to help. People only watched, or rather, only laughed, as if to mock him.

"How rude", he thought. "When they come after you too, you'll all know how it feels."

But his expectations were disappointed: the buffalo made him the sole target of their pursuit and ignored the crowd. Fortunately, at the crucial moment, he had woken up with a start. And now he sat brooding on the sofa. He freed a cigarette from the pack lying on the table and slipped it between his lips. Smoke billowed forth at contact with a lighter. "Dreams are just the fruit of sleep", he consoled himself. "Why should I be alarmed?"

Nevertheless, he felt very alarmed. The problem was that this was the third time he'd had such a dream; he had already had virtually identical nightmares.

The two previous dreams had also found him pursued by wild buffalo, with only minor differences in the setting and the way events unfolded. The buffalo had merely snorted and tossed their heads as they pawed the dusty ground. All of this had thrown Umar Salim into confusion. And now this dream. His wife woke up and joined him on the sofa. He immediately recounted his dream in an earnest tone.

"It's just a regular old dream. Of course dreams like that can bother you, if you're not sleeping soundly." Her words were calm.

"But this is the third time I've had the same dream! Think about it! The third time. It has to mean something. At the very least it's not just any old dream", said Umar Salim, defending himself adamantly. His wife assented.

A kind-hearted woman, she walked him slowly back to bed. There she patiently caressed her husband, fresh from his nightmare, until he fell back asleep.

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The fact is that Umar Salim was supposed to attend a wedding reception for one of his employees that night. But he'd been feeling a bit out of sorts, and had caged himself up in his room since early evening. His wife, accompanied by one of their children and chauffeured by their driver, represented him at the reception. Umar Salim dozed off halfway through 'World News Tonight', with their 24-inch colour TV still on. He slept soundly enough. He didn't stir at all when his wife and child returned, and neither she nor any of his children had the heart to wake him. But towards two in the morning he awoke, gasping for breath, his entire body drenched in sweat, his expression melancholy but tense. Because he woke up with a start, his wife woke up as well and hastily sat down, worry clearly written on her face.

"What is it? Are you ill?" she asked, agitated.

"No, no. It's nothing."

"Well, it certainly seems like you're sick. You are, aren't you?"

"No, enough of that, it's nothing. Come on, back to sleep. How was the party?", Umar Salim asked, changing the subject. His wife sat close, massaging her husband's hands.

"Very lively. Everyone was asking for you."

"That's nice. Okay, enough, back to sleep."

"You're not sick, then? You really don't look well. Let me give you a rubdown with balsam. Or would you like some medicine?"

"Just bring me some cold water, please. It's nothing, nothing at all."

His wife got out of bed. Umar Salim leaned against a heap of pillows. He was breathing much more evenly now. When his wife came back, he eagerly gulped down the glass of cold water. She climbed back into bed and lay down beside her husband, who then began to speak.

"I was dreaming again."

"Dreaming?"

"Yes, about being chased by wild buffalo. They kept chasing me all the way to the office. This is crazy."

"And?"

"Everyone in the office just let those damned buffalo chase me. They all were watching and laughing at me. And who am I? The director, right? How humiliating!"

"Still, it was only a dream, you know."

"But this was the fourth time. I have to consult a *dukun*<sup>1</sup> or a doctor or a whatchamacallit - a psychologist."

"Oh you, there's no need. You just have to get more exercise so you can sleep peacefully and not be bothered by absurd dreams like that."

"All right, starting tomorrow I'll play a lot more tennis. But I'm going to talk this over with the people in the office right away. I want to hear their opinion."

That afternoon, following a lunch meeting with the entire staff, Umar Salim narrated his dream. Contrary to his expectations, everyone roared with laughter.

"Ah, sir, you really know how to make us laugh", said one of the staff members, his sides heaving.

Although Umar Salim, being company director, felt quite put out by this, he managed to restrain himself. "I'm not joking. Why are you all laughing?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. We thought you just wanted to liven things up since it's stuffy in here and people were getting drowsy", another staff member answered nervously.

"That was my dream, all right, and not only that, it's the fourth time I've had it!"

"The fourth time?"

"That's right."

"And all of them were about being chased by wild buffalo?"

"Exactly. And what's more, this time, last night, I ran all the way to our office. You were all here. And what did you do? You didn't help drive the buffalo away, or even run away along with me. No, you just watched and laughed at me. This was really too much!"

"Wah". Everyone grumbled in unison.

"And now here I am, telling you about it, and you're laughing at me again. What do you call this?"

They all grew silent. No one dared venture an opinion out of fear of saying the wrong thing. No one dared look Umar Salim, the director, in the eye. The entire staff fell deep into thought. They regretted their premature laughter during the director's account of his dream.

"Enough. There's no point in you all getting sad or worried as well", Umar Salim said quickly, breaking the silence. "I only wanted to ask your opinion: what's the best way to handle crazy dreams like this? If any of you can help, please just speak out."

"I think it would be best for you to have complete rest. Maybe you're too tired", advised the head of the marketing department, his voice timid. The others began to summon the courage to chip in as well.

"You need a lot of exercise. Besides, that would be in keeping with the government's programmes too, wouldn't it? 'Let's make society sporty and make sports social'."

"That's a ridiculous slogan! Anyway, I've been exercising for a while now – I've been playing tennis."

"Yes, sir. But you have to take it up another notch, right? If you were playing once a week before, now you should play once every three days. Or even better, every day. That's my suggestion..."

"Yes, sir. Even better if you go jogging."

"I'm allergic to the morning air - it upsets my stomach. But what does exercise have to do with dreams? Actually, my wife recommends the same thing."

"It makes your blood circulate properly, sir. When nerves are tense, the circulation can slow down a bit. Then you sleep too deeply and your dreams can get a bit strange."

"Okay then, starting today, I'll play tennis every morning and evening. The point is that those closest to me - my wife as well as my staff in this office - have come up with the same advice. I'll follow it."

Umar Salim was fully convinced that the wisdom of the advice of his wife and his staff could be trusted. So each morning he got up very early to play tennis before bathing and eating breakfast. In the evening, upon returning from the office, he went to the tennis courts again. And, indeed, from then on Umar Salim felt much better physically. As it turned out, he also found himself sleeping much more peacefully. In the beginning he had always woken in the middle of the night and was often bothered by indecent dreams, but now he was always able to sleep soundly from evening until morning.

Even so, his dreams about being chased by wild buffalo kept recurring. Although the buffalo had at first appeared hazy, their image was now becoming more and more distinct. They were jet black, with long, backwards-curving necks. Their horns were black as well, their sharp tips gleaming, ready to gore his belly or his buttocks. The buffalo always snorted, their eyes fixing upon him as he fled in panic. In fact not a single buffalo in these recurring dreams had managed to gore him yet; every time it got to that point the scene of the dream changed and he fell back asleep. Indeed Umar Salim now never woke in the night after these nightmares. But the morning always found him in torment.

"You're probably wearing something red - pyjamas, a kimono, or a sarong", said his tennis partner on the court one morning.

"No, never. I've never worn red clothes", Umar Salim protested firmly.

"Maybe your sheets or pillow cases are red? Buffalo hate the colour red, you know."

"Could be, yes. It's true we sleep on red sheets and pillows sometimes."

"Well, that's probably the root of the problem then."

Umar Salim summoned his wife as soon as he returned from his tennis. She assumed he was going to ask for water or breakfast or a towel. Evidently not. In no uncertain terms he bade her change the sheets, pillow cases, curtains and anything else in the bedroom that was red. Everything red had to be got rid of right away. That was critical. Although his wife was startled, she didn't dare refuse her husband's request. Everything red was removed from the bedroom that very day, and Umar Salim went off to bed that evening, flushed with a sense of victory. His wife and children were still out, engaged in this and that - watching a video, listening to music, visiting friends, who knows what. Umar Salim then fell asleep. But he had barely dropped off when those buffalo appeared. Snorting, they directed their glistening, curved horns towards him. And their savageness was immediately apparent. Umar Salim tried to run, but it was very difficult. He tried as hard as he could to shout, but he could not. Suddenly his wife and children were shaking him awake.

"What is it, Dad? Were you dreaming again?"

"Yes."

"Buffalo chasing you again?"

"Yes."

"Even though we got rid of everything red."

"I don't know."

The following night, towards dawn, Umar Salim was dreaming once more. This time one of the buffalo had a neck wound; fresh blood was gushing out. The buffalo approached him, continuing to butt at the air, although the wound on its neck seemed to be an old

one. After this dream, however, a strange desire came over Umar Salim: he wanted very much to see a buffalo.

"But you saw one in the zoo a long time ago", said his wife.

"True, but that was the zoo. I've never seen one in the wild, you know."

"Well, then they'll come after you for real."

"Impossible."

"Aren't they wild, though?"

"Yes, but I just want to look at them from a distance."

Umar Salim divulged his desire to his staff. They nodded vigorously, agreeing fully with their director's proposal.

"In fact I also consulted with a friend who happens to be a psychologist, sir", said one.

"Yes? What did he have to say?"

"He said if you see a herd of buffalo in the wild with your own eyes, then your nightmares will disappear."

"For the heck of it I also asked a *dukun*, sir, one whose authority can be fully vouched for", said another staff member.

"Yes? And what did your *dukun* say?"

"He said your dreams will go away if you taste buffalo meat."

"So I have to eat buffalo meat and see them in the wild?"

"Maybe, sir, that's right."

"But whose advice should I follow?"

"If you can, follow both. That way the cure will work."

"All right then. But isn't this going to be difficult? Haven't wild buffalo been legally protected, so that they aren't easy to catch? Besides, it's hard enough to get to where they live."

"Everything can be taken care of, sir. Leave the details to us. The main thing is not to upset your daily routine anymore. That way the company's path is clearer and things are less uncertain for us as well."

The vehicle sped quietly one fine morning along a peaceful, tree-lined road. Umar Salim and several members of his staff were on their way to Ujung Kulon. One of them had originally suggested Pangandaran in Tasikmalaya or Baluran in East Java, but they heard there was little guarantee of encountering wild buffalo in either place. One of his staff members even recommended that he simply go to Bali for rest and relaxation and see and eat Balinese oxen there. After all, Balinese oxen looked just like wild buffalo. Umar Salim rejected this suggestion: it was wild buffalo, not Balinese oxen, that were chasing him in his dreams. What he needed to see and to eat were buffalo, not Balinese oxen.

The vehicle hastened onward to Labuhan, a town on the Sunda Strait, where they arranged everything. In the PPA office<sup>2</sup> Umar Salim's staff made an unsuccessful attempt at bribing the official in charge. The official very firmly stated that although it was indeed possible to view buffalo, they could not be slaughtered unless special

permission had already been sought. Moreover, such permission was granted only when the population of wild buffalo had grown too large.

"It's all right", said Umar Salim to his staff. "The main thing is that we go over there first. It'll be easy to work everything out once we're there."

Umar Salim's entourage bought rice and other provisions in the town, having heard that there were no stores in the jungle of Ujung Kulon. Then they chartered a motor boat to Peucang Island, where they were warmly greeted by the ranger. They were given lodging in the guest house and some kerosene to cook with. Umar Salim suggested they go that very night to find the buffalo, but the ranger rejected the idea out of hand.

"Impossible! First of all, it's quite dangerous to go out at night. There are still a lot of wild animals here. Secondly, you won't even be able to see the buffalo. Didn't you say you wanted to see the buffalo?"

"If I could, I'd capture and slaughter them all."

"Ah, you're too much, sir. No, it's impossible, you know!"

"It is possible! How much do you want? Just name your price. The important thing is that I catch one so that I can slaughter it. It's important."

"You can't do it. Not unless you already have a permit from Bogor."

"Okay, enough, don't be like that."

"Really, it's absolutely impossible. If you want to watch, and only watch them, then fine, please go right ahead - tomorrow."

In the morning Umar Salim crossed from Peucang Island to Ujung Kulon. After passing a little way on the path that cut through the jungle, the group arrived at a clearing.

"This is the buffalos' pasture ground", said the ranger guiding the group.

"Pasture ground?" Umar Salim was taken aback. "You mean someone tends them?"

"It's just an expression. These buffalo are wild", answered the ranger.

On the side of the pasture was an observation tower. From below the tower a herd of buffalo could be seen in the distance. These buffalo, in contrast to the ones in Umar Salim's dreams, did not appear savage.

"Huh! They're just like ordinary oxen, aren't they?" Umar Salim was astonished.

"Exactly. A buffalo is just a wild ox, you know."

"May I go over there?"

"They'd run away for sure. As soon as they catch the human scent, they'll run off without fail. Or the peacocks around them will definitely give a warning before they smell us. A peacock has much sharper eyes."

"Oh? There are peacocks too? Beautiful!<sup>3</sup> I'll try to get closer. Let's go."

Umar Salim slowly approached the herd of buffalo and their sentinel peacocks. The ranger was amazed: both the peacocks and the herd of buffalo seemed extremely placid, although they usually scattered as soon as they sensed someone approach. Umar Salim drew ever closer. He made for a black bull with white mottling that covered its hindquarters and extended down its legs as far down as the knees. The bull gave no reaction whatsoever.

"Why is it so different from my dreams?" Umar Salim wondered silently. The female buffalo, much more numerous and of a reddish-brown colour, also seemed extremely tame.

The ranger guiding them grew increasingly dumbfounded. "Do you have some sort of power to tame buffalo?" he asked from behind.

Umar Salim did not reply. He drew closer and closer to the bull. Once by its side he stroked its belly; the bull merely glanced at him and licked his hand. Umar Salim's hand moved up to the bull's neck and again the bull licked it. He grasped the bull's curved, sharp, glistening, black horns. The buffalo stayed calm, remaining submissive as Umar Salim caressed its neck. Then he remembered the advice about buffalo meat. He signalled the ranger to approach. Once he was near, Umar Salim grabbed the knife that hung at the ranger's waist. Before the ranger realised what was going on, the blade had pierced the buffalo's neck. The ranger was stunned. Flesh blood gushed forth. The staff members escorting Umar Salim were stunned. The herd of female buffalo were stunned. The peacocks were stunned as well. The bull snorted, more and more blood spurting from its neck. Its eyes now blazed wildly.

Frightened, Umar Salim's staff backed away slowly. The ranger also backed away slowly. The herd began to snort and stir. The bull also began to stir. The staff and the ranger scrambled away. The buffalo attacked. The peacocks fled. The bull, spouting blood, toppled Umar Salim with a kick.

Amidst the dust and dry grass, in the morning air, still fresh, Umar Salim felt the bull's hooves jabbing his buttocks, his stomach, his chest. Amidst the sparkling of the sky he felt the bull's horns pounding his head. Blood from the bull's neck spurting over his body. His own blood began to ooze. He felt as though he were in a dream. The bull, its neck bloodied, trampled and butted him again and again and again. His entire body became red with gore as the bull trampled and butted him ever more vigorously.

Umar Salim lay supine, his vision dimming. Suddenly the bull vanished from his sight. The wild buffalo that had all this time been pursuing him relentlessly in his dreams had now disappeared. And now, it was as though Umar Salim had woken from a long nightmare. A very long nightmare.<sup>4</sup>

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### **Endnotes**

1 A traditional medical practitioner in the societies of insular Southeast Asia, a 'witch doctor'.

2 Perlindungan dan Pengawetan Alam ('Protection and Preservation of the Environment'), the Indonesian equivalent of New Zealand's Department of Conservation.

3 The Indonesian text uses the English word here.

4 This story first appeared in *Horison*, No. 7, Th. XX, July 1985.