The Clod on a Thread

The Batak · the highlands of Sumatra, Indonesia

Where It Comes From

The Batak live in the mountains of northern Sumatra, around Lake Toba. Several flood and creation stories were written down from them by European visitors in the nineteenth century. The one here was recorded by the traveller Joachim von Brenner in 1894. An older telling, reported by Alexander von Humboldt, is more of a creation story, and tells of a serpent shaking the first earth into the sea.

What Happens

The earth grew old and dirty, and the god Debata sent a flood to cover it. The water rose until every living thing was drowned except one man and one woman.

They climbed the highest mountain, and the water rose to their feet. They had nowhere left to go.

Then Debata let down a clod of earth from heaven on a thread. The two stood on it, and it grew and grew until it became a whole new earth, and they came down from the mountain to live on it.

All people today, the story says, come from those two.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The god Debata sent it, because the earth had grown old and dirty.

Who was saved, and how. The last man and woman on the highest peak.

The boat or the refuge. A mountaintop, and then a new earth lowered from heaven.

What came after. The world is not simply dried out: it is made new, from a piece of heaven.

THINK IT THROUGH

In this story the old world is not repaired; a new one is given. What is the difference?

Sources

Joachim von Brenner, *Besuch bei den Kannibalen Sumatras* (1894), and the account reported by Alexander von Humboldt, both as given in James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 217–219.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.