



The Nusantara Assemblage: A Manifesto for the (Re)Commencement of Indonesian Thought

Min Seong Kim^{1*}; Rangga Kala Mahaswa²

¹ Graduate Program in Cultural Studies, Sanata Dharma University

² Faculty of Philosophy, Universitas Gadjah Mada

*Corresponding author. Email: minseong.kim@outlook.com

ABSTRACT

The *Nusantara* is the geospatial correlate of Indonesia's official state ideology of Pancasila. The statist discourse around Pancasila, however, demands the Nusantara to be simultaneously subdued and sublime. Subdued, such that the totalizing and territorializing drive of the modern nation-building project may proceed against the fragmentary *being* of the archipelago; and sublime, for it is the profound and rich "traditional culture" of the Nusantara of which the official state ideology purports to embody. This paper offers a critique of *Filsafat Nusantara*, a mode of doing Indonesian philosophy that contributes to the statist capture of the Nusantara by purporting to extract and explicate "local wisdoms" and "hidden values" of the archipelago, in accordance with the statist injunction to render the Nusantara a sublime, "culturally rich" object.

Keywords: Indonesian archipelago, Pancasila, Indonesian philosophy, *Filsafat Nusantara*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigeneity, insinuating a splendor of the past and respect for traditional culture, and its spatial correlate, the *Nusantara*, a culturally loaded term for the Indonesian archipelago, remain central to the "creation myth" of *Pancasila*—the official state ideology—and by extension, the Indonesian state of which it is supposedly the "philosophical ground" [1]. In the story of its creation, one endlessly repeated in indoctrination programs at all levels of education, Pancasila presents itself not as an ideology imposed from the outside but as organically emerging from within the Nusantara [2], [3]. Considered as a solution to the task of building a nation through which the people of the archipelago had to be interpellated, Pancasila proved to be a relatively successful one. Today, when Indonesia exerts significant economic, cultural, and military influences in the Asia Pacific region, Clifford Geertz's remark following the internecine strife of the fifties and sixties that the country gives off the impression of being a *state manqué* sounds extraordinarily outdated [4]. Yet, at the same time, the success of Pancasila as a unifying, inclusive ideology came at a price for the Nusantara that it territorialized: for the very *form* of socio-political organization that Pancasila was designed to support—the modern state—required the Nusantara to be totalizable as a specific unicity.

The modern state-building project requires the production of what might be called, drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, a "statist assemblage": a vertical, hierarchizing arrangement in which all elements and agencies are conditioned and controlled by a center [5]. However, the effect of the statist "overcoding" in the discourses of Nusantara can only be a kind of neutralization of the very *challenge* the Nusantara poses to thought *qua archipelagic*, which we understand broadly in line with the idea ensconced in Derrida's remark that "[t]here is no world, there are only islands" [6, p. 9]. For Derrida, the eclipse of modern, Western, rationality reveals the non-existence of a "world" that coheres as a comprehensible and manageable totality. Instead, there are only *islands*, in the plural, or, as Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler explain, "spaces of disruptive relations that work against modernity's requirement of coherence and its metaphysical grounding propositions" [8, p. 396]—the recognition of this *impossibility* of a world, it might be argued, is integral to the *archipelagic* perspective that remains after the demise of modern rationality. Despite the fact that the Indonesian state regards itself as an "archipelagic state" and refers to its geopolitical imaginary *Wawasan Nusantara* [7], the ideal of (national) unity it espouses as well as the aspiration to render a "firm foundation" for that unity in the shape of an official state ideology are in tension with what thinkers critical of modern rationality have thought in terms of the archipelagic [8]. In the end, the desire discernible in the statist discourse regarding the Nusantara is the desire to transform dispersed multiplicities of islands and bottomless seas into the *terra firma* of a continent. Questions thus arise as to what the Nusantara actually becomes, *against its archipelagic being*, in the process of statist capture and how that capture is achieved.

2. OBJECTIVES

To the question of what the Nusantara becomes in the process of statist capture, this paper responds that the Nusantara becomes both *subdued* and *sublime*. It aims to show how a segment of Indonesian philosophy that we call “*Filsafat Nusantara*”, which is preoccupied with pronouncing the “cultural richness” and “wisdom” of the Nusantara, colludes with the statist capture and stultification of the Nusantara. The possibility of philosophy in and of the Nusantara that breaks with *Filsafat Nusantara* shall also be considered.

3. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Indigeneity commands great symbolic efficacy in Indonesia [9], [10], and appealing to some indigenous value, wisdom, or culture to quell dissent against novel or controversial socio-politico-economic arrangements remains an eminent strategy of the country’s leaders [11, p. 64]. The paradigmatic exemplar of this strategy is none other than the official state ideology of Pancasila itself, which has been construed as the philosophical and ideological ground of Indonesia that is but the “crystallization” of the nation’s values and expressive of the *Weltanschauung* of the Indonesian people [1]. This statist discourse, however, does not sit well with the Nusantara qua *archipelagic*, an idea glimpsed in Derrida’s remark that “[t]here is no world, there are only islands” [6, p. 9] that has inspired many contemporary nissologists [8]. The archipelagic perspective sees in lieu of a coherent totality of *eine Welt* only disruptive relations that work against such attempts at totalization. In this case, it can be asked whether the positionality of the subject to whom the Nusantara *appears as totalizable*, to whom the *Weltanschauung*—one of the things Pancasila is said to be [1]—of the Nusantara *appears as singular*, and the diverse values and beliefs express or cohere into a common “firm foundation” (that Pancasila either already is or must become, according to its proponents), is so different from that of the subject of Western, modern, rationalism that Deleuze and Guattari had characterized as an “arboreal” style of thinking [5]. From such perspectives wherein the possibility of firm foundations is placed under question, Pancasila was, and largely remains, a project intertwined with modernity’s—or more specifically, with the modern state’s—territorializing drive and demand for firm foundations and for precisely that reason, antithetical to the Nusantara qua its archipelagic being.

The question is, then, what the Nusantara is made to *become* in its statist capture, that is, *how it is constituted as an object of the statist discourse*. In this paper, we explore this question by examining a mode of philosophizing termed “*Filsafat Nusantara*.” Debates over the question of indigeneity in the philosophical discourse of Indonesia’s archipelagic neighbors, the Philippines, are useful for showing how *Filsafat Nusantara*, with its preoccupation with culture (*kebudayaan*) [12], participates in the statist capture of the Nusantara. In particular, Aldrin Mathew Go’s critique of the “hyperreality” of the referent of “Filipino” in the notion of authentic, pre-colonial Filipino philosophy can contribute to illustrating the nature of “Nusantara” in *Filsafat Nusantara* [13]. Asserting—much like the important critic of “ethnophilosophy” in the African context, Paulin J. Hountondji [14]—that philosophy cannot be “a set of opinions, beliefs, or the collective *Weltanschauung* of a given ethnicity,” Go employs Baudrillardian notions to argue that the referent of “Filipino” in “Filipino philosophy” is a retroactive illusion produced by the *search* for it, not the reflection of any particular reality [13].

While Go’s critique can be adopted as a general characterization of the referent of “Nusantara” in *Filsafat Nusantara*, Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of proverbial wisdom allows the operation of *Filsafat Nusantara* in the statist constitution of the Nusantara to be further analyzed. In an essay on Schelling, Žižek invites readers to “construct proverbial wisdom out of the relationship between terrestrial life, its pleasures, and its Beyond” [15, p. 71]. In this hypothetical exercise, we can discover, Žižek suggests, that for any “wisdom” that sounds “deep” (e.g.: “Life is an enigma, do not try to penetrate its secrets, accept the beauty of its unfathomable mystery!”), one is able to create a contradictory statement that sounds as deep (e.g.: “Do not allow yourself to be distracted by false mysteries that just dissimulate the fact that, ultimately, life is very simple—it is what it is, it is simply here without reason and rhyme!”). Then, it is yet again possible to imagine a synthesis of the two contradictory pieces of wisdom (e.g.: putting “mystery” and “simplicity” together, we can get: “The ultimate, unfathomable mystery of life resides in its very simplicity, in the simple fact that there is life”) being presented as profound, too [15, pp. 71–72]. In terms of their verbal content, all of these statements of “wisdom” are, as Graham Harman nicely summarizes Žižek’s point, “equally arbitrary and stupid,” and the what makes them appear profound is “the implicit Master who utters each proverb does so in a lordly manner apparently immune to counterargument” [16, p. 20]. The identity of the “implicit Master” on which *Filsafat Nusantara* relies to secure the effectivity of its pronouncements of the profundity of the riches and wisdom of the archipelago is a critical step in the argument of this paper.

The notion of the ontological “pluriverse” [17] is a useful starting point for considering an approach to philosophizing *in and with the Nusantara* that breaks from *Filsafat Nusantara* and the statist capture of the archipelago

it supports. However, the notion of the pluriverse risks offering just another exploitable notion of Nusantara's "richness." A potential critical positionality against this risk shall be sketched via the idea of "abyssal thought" recently explored by Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler [18]. Against the tendency to see, all too conveniently, in indigenous worlds alternatives to modern worldmaking, Pugh and Chandler explore the paraontological perspective of the world as finally groundless—hence "abyss"—that emerges from the works of Caribbean thinkers such as Antonio Benítez-Rojo and Édouard Glissant. We suggest that the resolute refusal of these Caribbean thinkers to "provide us with a productivist alternative understanding of being, of ontology, to that posited by modern worldmaking" [18, p. 86] intimates a mode of thinking with the archipelago that departs radically from that of *Filsafat Nusantara*.

4. METHODS

Concepts and theoretical perspectives evoked in the present work were strategically selected to articulate an antagonistic discourse in the Laclauian vein [19]–[21], in line with its practical objective of presenting a concise and effective criticism of the statist capture of the Nusantara and the collusion of *Filsafat Nusantara* in that process. Aspects of poststructuralist discourse analysis, elaborated by Jason Glynos and David Howarth [22], have been employed in the identification and analysis of dominant discourses of Nusantara. The ultimate validity of this paper's "method" shall be judged on the basis of its practical effects, of which two are intended: (1) provoking myopic culturalists and statist ideologues; and (2) mobilizing those who wish *think again*, against the stultifying operations of *Filsafat Nusantara*.

5. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

One of the motivations behind the creation of Pancasila in 1945 was to present a novel socio-political arrangement, namely the modern state of *bangsa Indonesia* (Indonesian nation), as something not entirely alien to the inhabitants of the Indonesian archipelago: in short, to naturalize it. A prominent strategy to which nationalist leaders resorted was "adducing the existence of a natural, essential, unchanging Indonesian cultural identity and linking this to a specific geographical space" [23, p. 301], the space that is called the "Nusantara." Within the dominant statist discourse, therefore, the legitimacy of the modern Indonesian state relies at least partly on its embodying indigenous or traditional values—indeed, the intimate connection between the ideology on which the Indonesian state is purportedly founded, and the Nusantara is something that politicians and intellectuals like to emphasize to this day.

In the statist discourse, the Nusantara must be constituted as *both subdued and sublime*. This is because whatever disruptiveness and the impossibility of ultimate ground or one coherent world the Nusantara might harbor in its archipelagic *being* would be contrary to the achievement of national unity. Thus, the Nusantara must be tamed or domesticated. However, at the same time, within the statist discourse, the Nusantara must be rich and alluring. This is because the legitimacy of, and the respect for, the state and its ideology are founded on the fact that they reflect the "national character" or cultural essence said to be contained in the Nusantara. The statist injunction, then, is to make the Nusantara a docile reservoir of cultural richness. A significant part of Indonesian philosophy has heeded the injunction, dedicating itself to explicating precisely that *richness* or to pronouncing the profound *wisdom (kearifan)* that the archipelago is expected to harbor [12].

As to what Indonesian philosophy in the aforementioned mode, which shall be termed "*Filsafat Nusantara*," practically involves, an observation from Banin Sukmono is indicative. Sukmono—who is an alumnus of the philosophy faculty of Universitas Gadjah Mada, arguably the most elite academic center of *Filsafat Nusantara*—observes that it usually comes down to searching for "some philosophy that is hidden in the cultural objects of the archipelago," or trying to "find 'something philosophical' behind the architecture of houses, traditional dances, and the thought of a community" [24]. Aldrin Mathew Go's critique of the search for indigenous Filipino philosophy provides insights into how that "something hidden" might be conjured and, moreover, why the search to uncover an "authentic" philosophy in the course of a post-colonial nation-building may be problematic. Characterizing the search for an authentic philosophy of the pre-colonial Filipino as driven by nostalgia, Go argues that it is "the nostalgia itself that creates that from which it is the nostalgia of." When Filipino philosophers claim to have identified some authentic Filipino philosophy, what is actually being identified as authentic is a retroactive illusion of Filipino-ness. Drawing from Baudrillard, Go describes the "Filipino" herein as a "hyperreal" Filipino that is "nothing more than the surface 'depth effect' produced [by] the sign itself." It can be argued that the "richness" and "wisdom" of the Nusantara that *Filsafat Nusantara* pronounces are similarly illusory. In fact, because *Filsafat Nusantara* explicitly valorizes profound wisdom of local cultures and traditions as required by the statist discourse, the mechanism by which *its* hyperreal Nusantara is constructed is one that is well-understood and is explainable with reference to the role of the implicit Master in pronouncements of wisdom.

When considered in terms of their literal content, proverbial wisdom that sound profound, Slavoj Žižek has shown [15], are “arbitrary and stupid” [16, p. 20]. Their profundity is secured only by the endowment of pronouncements of wisdom with authority by an implicit Master. This diagnosis is applicable to *Filsafat Nusantara*: when it declares to have found “something philosophical,” some profound “local wisdom” hidden in cultural practices and artifacts of the Nusantara, *Filsafat Nusantara* draws its *charisma* from the statist discourse in which the Nusantara *cannot but be* the reservoir of cultural richness. *The Nusantara is culturally rich and full of wisdom*—this is an *expectation* which is not only authorized but also demanded by the statist discourse, because *it requires the Nusantara to be such* in so far as Indonesia is construed within that discourse as founded on an ideology that supposedly is the crystallization of the traditional cultures and values of the Nusantara. In pronouncing the cultural richness of the Nusantara, *Filsafat Nusantara* is not only *reliant* on the statist discourse, but also *serves* the statist discourse by giving what it needs. This is the gist of Indonesian philosophy’s mode of participation in the taming and stultification of the Nusantara, that is, in the modern nation-building project. But if philosophy, as Deleuze had written [25], does not serve the state and its use is “harming stupidity,” then *Filsafat Nusantara* cannot begin as philosophy in so far as it partakes in the statist capture of the Nusantara.

Following Alain Badiou, one of the tasks of philosophy might be understood as thinking the “truth” of a situation that is produced through an active process of investigation that *avoids determination* by the extant regimes of organizing the situation that Badiou calls—political undertones intended—the “state of the situation” [26], [27]. If the dominant discourses on the Nusantara are shaped by the needs of the modern state, escape therefrom might draw on the growing literature on the *pluriverse* and *ontological politics* in humanities and social sciences [28]–[31], which asserts the irreducible plurality of worlds, in the plural, against the imposition of the single world of (Western-centric) modernity. While the idea of the ontological pluriverse and its relevance in the Indonesian context should be affirmed [17], the preceding discussion suggests what must also be circumvented is the risk that the idea of the pluriverse might end up simply offering another kind of “richness”—that is, an “ontological richness”—that could easily be recuperated within the process of state capture. A risk of this kind is arguably actualized in the “indigenous turn” in the Western academic and policy discourses, which David Chandler and Julian Reid have criticized for reproducing a “colonial” dynamic in knowledge production rather than subverting it [32]. There is little reason why Chandler and Reid’s criticism of the expropriation of indigenous worlds by the Western academia should not be taken as a warning for the Indonesian academia, too: the dynamics between the modern Indonesian state and its relative “peripheries,” such as Papua, suggest that the *success* of the nation-building project across the archipelago can only mean that the dichotomies between the colonizer and the colonized, the exploiter and the exploited, and even the West and the Rest, cannot be as stable and clear as the statist discourse pretends [33]–[35]. *This* recognition opens a critical positionality, one that aligns with what Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler have recently presented as the *abyssal thought* emerging from the Caribbeans [18].

Abyssal thought is resolutely anti-nostalgic and anti-productivist in embracing the radical groundlessness of its own positionality. The “subject” of this thought is one whose position is constructed negatively through “cuts and divisions” of modern slavery and racial capitalism, a position from which no positive ontological projection, in the Heideggerian sense, can be made [18]. In other words, the abyssal subject of Caribbean thought is a *subject for whom there is no world to affirm, no “worlding” to participate in*. Although the full implications of abyssal thought, including its contentious relation to the notion of pluriverse, cannot be explored here, it can nonetheless be emphasized that such a thought, in the Indonesian context, would attempt to reveal the Nusantara as intersected by a plurality of trajectories and temporalities that renders it an arrangement of elements that is far more agonistic and fragmented than the hyperreal Nusantara demanded by the statist discourse. Thus, rather than seeing whatever “riches” of the Nusantara as something that the (Western) “other” of Indonesia occludes as the statist discourse and its scholarly servants say, a more critical position may seek to reveal that this dichotomy between West and Indonesia is yet another way to *stabilize* Nusantara as an object of the statist discourse, as a simultaneously docile and sublime object that could be exploited for various ends that serve the necropolitical alliance of state and capital. What fidelity to the pluriverse of the Nusantara demands of thought in Indonesia today is the unravelling of aspirations to unicity and firm foundations.

6. CONCLUSION

The statist discourse centered on the official ideology of Pancasila demands the Nusantara to become both subdued and sublime, such that the totalizing and territorializing drive of the modern nation-building project may proceed against the fragmentary and disruptive *being* of the archipelago while simultaneously presenting Pancasila and the Indonesian state founded on it as embodying the cultural riches, traditional values, and profound wisdom of the archipelago. This paper has offered a critique of *Filsafat Nusantara* as a mode of doing philosophy in Indonesia that purports to extract and explicate “local wisdoms” and “hidden values” of the Nusantara. *Filsafat Nusantara* has hitherto contributed to the

statist capture of the Nusantara. However, by searching, not for the riches and secrets hidden in the (hyperreal) Nusantara demanded by the statist discourse, but lines of escape from the territorializing aspirations of the state and its official ideology, *Filsafat Nusantara* could become a thinking adequate to what the Nusantara, in its archipelagic being, is capable of finally becoming: an assemblage irreducible to the object of myopic culturalists and state-sanctioned ideologues.

7. COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

This article is free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and the publication process itself.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Min Seong Kim proposed the overarching argument and undertook the task of writing. Rangga Kala Mahaswa contributed supporting material and critical commentary, especially regarding *Filsafat Nusantara*.

9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the participants of the panel session at the 2023 Critical Island Studies, hosted by Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, wherein this paper was presented.

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