

# Critical Spiritualism: Rasa, Reason, Religion<sup>1</sup>

toward developing a “cultural software” to answer the need for  
“identity without border”

Ayu Utami

## Background

During the military regime Indonesians knew verywell a political taboo called by a feminine name: SARA—acronym of *Suku, Agama, Ras, Antargolongan* (ethnicity, religion, race, inter-communities). This taboo, reinforced by various regulations, forbade speech or other forms of public presentation that could injure the harmonious heterogeniety or *kebhineka-an* of Indonesia—*kebhinekaan* is the image Indonesia (was) proud of. However, this taboo dissolved after Reformasi, letting go of a democratic Indonesia that ironically tolerate or even enjoy hate speech against minorities and political enemies. We have seen an escalation of cases of violence related to religion and other indications of intolerance. In short: we see a picture contrary to the image we kept for 70 years, from 1928 Sumpah Pemuda to 1998 Reformasi; an image of a community in which peaceful diversity is an ideal as well as a fact (albite with some fractures). It is then reasonable to ask: will Indonesia stay “*bhineka tunggal ika*” or upholding its unity in diversity? Will it stay the biggest muslim population that serve the example of a tolerant nation? Or will it be less and less tolerant and aimed at identity politics?

The questions are sound but not meant to be overlooking other crucial issues such as corruption, ecology, social justice, etc. which sometimes overlap or intensify each other. Without belittling other issues I limit myself to the area of symbols and ideas, or the realm of *rasa*, *reason*, and *religion*. I’d like to call this area the “cultural software” of a society.

\*

---

<sup>1</sup> This note is to be read at the Frans Seda Foundation Seminar, University of Tillburg (9 June 2016). The topic—Critical Spiritualism: *Rasa, Reason, Religion*—has been presented in different formats; as a keynote speech at the 2015 EuroSEAS congress in Vienna, at Indonesia Today seminar in Amsterdam (2015), in a discussion organized by Liberal Islam Network in Jakarta and other occasions. Critical spiritualism is a topic I have been working on, both analitically and creatively, in the last eight years or since I wrote *Bilangan Fu* (novel, 2008). This paper has not been edited and not meant to be published.

## The proposal: Critical Spiritualism

My proposal is a “software” called critical spiritualism. I first used the term in my novel *Bilangan Fu (The Number Fu, 2008)*. What is it actually? In the novel, it is the protagonist’s proposal by which we can construct an attitude of being spiritual while at the same time keep a critical mind. Parang Jati, the main character of the novel, believes that this attitude is needed to protect and maintain our humanity and ecology in facing the great challenges. What are the great challenges? In the novel they are the three M-s: Militarism, Monotheism, and Modernism. It is a triad that, according to the protagonist, shape the form and the problems of the world of his days, i.e. the turn of the 20th to 21st century.

The novel is set in Java, in a region of karst or limestone hills in the south coast not very far from Yogyakarta. The setting is fictional but not at all a fantasy, as we know of factual similar settings and problems. The conflict in the novel is between two sides: the local syncretic belief and its spiritual relation to ecology on one side, and the alliance of militarism, monotheism, and modernism on the other side. Modernism supply to this triad of M with greed and efficiency, monotheism with ideological enmity, and militarism with the use of force. In the novel, what at stake is the ecosystem of karst or “living limestone” of its setting that have previously been protected by the local syncretic belief and the traditional way of life. Local beliefs hold many taboos that in effect could protect ecology. Those taboos are played down as superstition by modern ideas, and cursed as idolatrous by monotheism.

What we see here is that the local syncretic belief can no longer protect the ecology against the powerful triad of M, with its massive scale of greed, enmity, and force. Nature and the spirits are being destroyed by modernism, monotheism, and militarism. The might of the triad is unbeatable by local “software”, i.e the syncretic local belief. Parang Jati knows it. Towards being defeated, he proposed “critical spiritualism” as a cultural software or strategy to help protect nature and humanity in the future. He was tragically killed before he succeeded in explaining his cultural program. (I many times have my protagonist killed by a military group. It is a personal literary tendency rather than a plan, and a way through which I keep in our memory my friends, unfictional martyrs of humanity: Munir, Wiji Thukul and others.)

Now, Parang Jati is dead before he manage to describe his cultural software named critical spiritualism, and so it becomes my task. It is a scheme I could think of and suggest in order to authentically develop an attitude that enable us to be spiritual and keep a critical mind at the same time. When I say “authentically” it means that we can develop this attitude through a reflective learning of our own experience, the experience of Indonesia.

(Certainly there have been many great efforts on synthesizing faith and reason throughout the history of ideas, from Ibn Sina to Aquinas in the middle ages, to the dialogue between Ratzinger and Habermas in the contemporary times. I don’t mean to say that Indonesia is so exotic that it can only take its own path. No. From a practical point of view, it is too complicated and unfair if an Indonesian can only make a legitimate syntesize after reading Al Ghazali or Aquinas or Ratzinger or Habermas. We don’t have time to go all the

way through other's achievements and contexts. It's good if we can study the world's philosophy, but—for practical reason—we need to define a way within our own proximity. Moreover, Indonesia's context have always been open to influences. Nusantara, or the islands that become Indonesia, has been a melting pot of world ideas. Even when we are trying to find an authentic articulation it is by no means about originality. Regarding the title of this presentation—Rasa, Reason, and Religion—none of the three words are originally Nusantara. However, we have adopted and made them part of our authentic experience.)

\*

## Rasa

I want to start the journey into our authentic experience with *rasa*. (Remember, authenticity is not about originality.) This word definitely came from Sanskrit. There is an ancient book *Natya Shastra*, a great handbook on Indian performance art, in which “*rasa*” or sentiment is described in amazing details. It is said that the book was compiled between five century before and five century in the beginning of our era—which make it the Indian contemporary to Classical Greek texts. Indonesia have adopted the comprehension of *rasa* into its own experience. In Indonesian language, *rasa* is about sentiment, feeling, emotion, sensation. But serious studies have shown that the meaning of *rasa* is deeper and broader than what is written in the dictionary.

Zoetmulders, Geertz, Magnis-Suseno, and Benamon are among the scholars who have written elaboratively of *rasa* as a key to understand the Javanese culture and art. Before we go on, you may ask a question: can Java represent Indonesia? Java is certainly not enough to describe Indonesia, but it has left a big influence in the formation of Indonesia's identity, for better or worse. This talk is not meant to give a total representation of Indonesia. It is rather a journey through one authentic route in order to gain deeper understanding about ourself.

As we don't have much time, I skip any narrative illustration and go to the main points about *rasa*:

- *Rasa* is the intuitive, sensible, affective ways of understanding, in contrast to reason, logic, rational or scientific knowledge.
- *Rasa* doesn't seek for conclusive truth, rather it seeks for the ballance among subjects, a harmony between you and me. Please bear in mind that reason / rationality works by separating the subject who knows from the object that is known. The cartesian separation of subject-object is the platform on which reason can operate and there lies the primordial violence. On the contrary, *rasa* has a totally different mechanism. It doesn't see others as objects, rather it sees others as subjects. Here we can probably understand why in animistic spirituality everything has spirit. Trees, stones, mountains, keris, gamelans, they all are dwelled by spirits. Consequently, they all are subjects. *Rasa* sees others as subjects. Then it seeks for the comfortable relation among subjects. That

explains why in Indonesian language we find key concepts like *tenggang rasa*, *tepa selira*, *gotong royong*... Comfortable relation is what *rasa* seeks in the superficial level. In the ultimate level it seeks for union. Its mechanism avoids conflict. *Rasa* leads us to harmony and union. (That sounds perfect, but it is not as perfect as it sounds...)

- I argue here that *rasa* is the basic mechanism of our centuries old tolerance and syncretism. *Rasa* is the DNA of our plurality. But...
- The problem of *rasa* is (1): it doesn't have the mechanism of resolution once conflict has happened. It is an ethic teaching that prevents the use of force. Once amock or conflict breaks, it doesn't have a mechanism other than to withdraw and let time heals.<sup>2</sup> Notice that amock (to run amock)—which has become an English word—came from Malay language which is the lingua franca of Nusantara and the basic material of Indonesian language. Why the British didn't translate the Malay's "amock" to English could be the sign of its peculiarity for the British mind: the people of Nusantara were nice people, full of smile in their face, avoid conflict, until suddenly they run amock. Then, once amock broke, like when a volcano erupts, they have to let it go and let time heals. The question is: these days, do we have enough time to let time heals? (Probably we don't...)
- My next argument is that today we cannot depend only on *rasa* to maintain our century age peaceful plurality. First, we probably don't have enough time to heal the damage caused by modern technology which caters massive greed and enmity. Second, the world today is too much defined by reason. Those who doesn't speak the language of reason will be defeated or left behind. The problem of *rasa* (2) is that it doesn't speak the language of reason. It is then in danger of extinction. Hence, to repeat my argument: *Rasa* is the DNA of our centuries age plurality. However, now, our plurality cannot be maintained only by *rasa*, because today's challenge is so great, i.e. the challenge of reason, which manifest in the form of the triad of M: monotheism, modernism, and militarism.

---

<sup>2</sup> **Mangkunegoro III, Wedhatama, 70, sekar gambuh, laras pelog pathet nem:** *Samengko ingsun tutur/ Gantya sembah ingkang kaping catur / Sembah rasa / karasa wosing dumadi / Dadine wus tanpa tuduh / Mung kalawan kasing batos*

**Ranggawarsita, sekar sinom, laras pelog pathet nem:** *Amenangi zaman edan / Ewuh aya ing pambudi / Melu edan ora tahan / Yen tan melu ngalakoni / Boya kaduman melik / Kaliran wekasanipun / Dilalah kersa Allah/ Begja begja sing kang lali / Luwih begja sing eling lan waspada*

**Mangkunegoro III, Wedhatama, sekar pangkur, laras pelog pathet nem:** *Si Pengung nora nglegawa / Sangsayarda denira cacariwis / Ngandhar-andhar angendhukur / Kandhane nora kaprah / Saya elok alangka longkanganipun / Si Wasis waskita ngalah / Ngalingi marang si Pinqqing*

\*

## Reason

Now we go back to the triad of M in my fictional work *Bilangan Fu*: modernism, monotheism, militarism. I believe they constitute the great challenge that endanger factual nature and local spirituality. I put those three entities under one rubrication: reason. I will go very brief about this:

- While *rasa* doesn't seek for logical consistency nor conclusive truth, reason seeks for them. Reason seeks for logical consistency and when it face a conflict, it subdue or exclude one or the other in order to reach to a "conclusive truth", albeit with the possibility of choosing fake truth or forced truth. Its truth is about winning. We see this mechanism operates in modernism, monotheism, and militarism. Those 3M are triumphalist ideologies.
- Modern education is dominated by reason. It is made very powerful and efficient through the use of standardization. Rabindranath Tagore in India to Ki Hajar Dewantara in Java had criticize modern western education with its massive standardization and too much emphasize on reason. Tagore established Santiniketan (with the money from the Nobel Prize Literature he got) and Ki Hajar founded Taman Siswa. Ki Hajar introduced a nationally famous educational slogan in Indonesia: *cipta – rasa – karsa* (reason, *rasa*, and motivation). However both Tagore and Ki Hajar had not succeeded in terms of scale and effectiveness to compete with modern education. Later on Santiniketan also developed into a modern university, Visva Bharati. While Taman Siswa is sadly left far behind modern schools in Indonesia. The world is more and more dominated by reason, which mechanism is triumphalistic. The influence of *rasa* is withering away in every generation. (Now, many if not most of the Indonesian participants in this seminar are educated abroad.) Ask the new generation about *rasa*, and compare the result to the what Geertz, Magnis-Suseno, Zoetmulder, Umar Kayam have written. We don't have to go too far by comparing it to classical literature such as Ranggawarsita or Mangkunegara to realize how far Indonesia's new generation has lost the understanding of *rasa*.

The lost of *rasa* to reason is analogous to the lost of spirituality to dogmas in religion. It is comparable also, though not quite similar, to the lost of socialism to capitalism—but this is a joke.

\*

## Religion: Imagining a mental software called Critical Spiritualism

Am I proposing a new religion? Once I was asked by a Japanese audience in a literary festival: what is your spiritual teaching. I am not at all a spiritualist in the sense that I have a sixth sense to communicate with spirits or that I practice esoteric rituals. I don't idealized or romanticized the beauty and the loftiness of spiritual life or condemn material life. Spirituality is not an achievement. You cannot ask what is success or how do we want to be remembered in terms of spirituality. I am not proposing a new religion like Parang Jati, the protagonist in *Bilangan Fu*. But I do try to find a way to promote an attitude that enable us to cultivate rasa and sharpen reason at the same time; to find a mental application that enable us to be spiritual and critical in a coherent way: a mental software of critical spiritualism. It is an ambitious project and I am not there yet. I have started but I am still halfway to complete the task. My target market is Indonesians, as I am developing it through the Indonesian experience. It is not to compete with traditional wisdoms nor with modern endeavors like Islam Liberal Networks (which I was part of), or Islam Nusantara (which was re-popularized last year), etc—we are all promoting mental programs for a peaceful faith that compatible with living in diversity, we cannot be competing each other.

Critical spiritualism has an essential relation with the theme of this seminar: identity without border. Because, critical spiritualism is about the communication between rasa and reason in which the border of identity, defined by rational conceptualization, is to be made self-aware of its porous or permeability, and by this way we can perceive identity as source and not as border or limit.

How will this mental software of critical spiritualism look like? I guarantee that it will be user-friendly. I already wrote for shallow readers some topics on critical spiritualism in an easy and popular way. For intellectual and young leaders in this seminar I share some of the complex behind-the-scene. How will this mental apps of critical spiritualism look like I cannot tell in this occasion. But I thank all of you to have patiently listened to the introduction of my unfinished project. A project that I undertake because I have a faith in *bhineka tunggal ika*, I have a hope to maintain a peaceful plural Nusantara, and I because I love Indonesia. Thank you.