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Review of *Nusantara*

Heidi Shamsuddin.
*Nusantara: A Sea of
Tales*. Singapore:
Penguin Books, 2021.
223 pages

In the introduction to the book *Nusantara: A Sea of Tales*, writer Heidi Shamsuddin loosely defines “Nusantara” as an umbrella term for “countries sharing the Austronesian language such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines, Timor Leste, Madagascar, Oceania, as well as countries where Austronesian minorities are present such as Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Taiwan” (2). The premise of this definition compels us to imagine the topology and formation of archipelagos and islands that make up the Austronesian world. When the book collects and surveys stories and then maps out the points and turns where they intersect, it turns out to be a compelling contribution to Southeast Asian studies and, more so, island studies. Indeed, it encourages us to constellate the myriad of interconnected narratives that reveal the secrets of the deepest oceans and seas bridging and separating the islands.

Nusantara consolidates sixty-one tales from oral and written traditions that sketch out a wide array of narratives about the natural environment, humans, more-than-humans, lifeworlds, and cultural practices. It retells tales classified into different types, such as “geomythical stories,” which detail the relationship between lore and the changing physical landscape; “legends,” which try to explain the ontology and teleology of everything, usually by involving “heroic characters or fantastical places, and often encompass the spiritual belief of the culture where they originate” (100); “tales about disabilities”; “happily-ever-after narratives,” which follow the conventions of fairy tales; “trickster stories,” which exemplify

social criticisms against unequal power interplay; “comic stories,” which aim to entertain the community; and “stories from Sulalat al-Sulatin (Sejarah Melayu),” which is one of the earliest publications that recount classic Malay tales. At the end of each piece is a capsule summary of the writer’s thoughts, readings, and perspectives.

Some of the remarkable pieces in the book are “The Youngest Fairy Princess of Kayangan” from Malaysia and “The Hunter and the Seven Swimming Maidens” from the Philippines. These tales are versions of the story of the seven maidens who fly down to bathe in a lake on earth, with the youngest of them losing her clothes and eventually marrying a hunter. Many years later, she discovers that the hunter has hidden her clothes, so she wears them again and then flies home to her original abode. Many variations of this tale are prominent across the Nusantara region, which suggest common desires, concepts, and worldviews among islands separated from but also conjoined by bodies of water.

The four different narratives featuring Sang Kancil, a clever mouse deer and trickster figure that outsmarts the powers-that-be, are also interesting pieces in the collection. In these trickster stories, Sang Kancil tricks bigger and more powerful animals, like Sang Harimau (tiger) and Sang Buaya (crocodile). These stories constitute “a commentary on the abuse of power by those in authority with Sang Kancil representing a symbol of resistance and change” (158).

The piece “The World on the Tip of a Buffalo’s Horn” from Malaysia features the folkloric image of a colossal buffalo carrying the earth on the tip of its horn to keep it safe and guarded. Every time the buffalo gets tired from carrying the weight of the earth, it tosses up the earth and then catches it with its other horn. These sudden movements explain natural phenomena such as earthquakes, aftershocks, and volcanic eruptions. The tale is also an affirmation of the idea that lands, water, animals, plants, trees, and stones are more aptly called “more” than “non” and “post,” prefixes which we

usually attach to what we, in our arrogance, imagine to be the *other* than human.

The world-making that *Nusantara* offers about the culturally and linguistically Austronesian-related islands and archipelagos is rhythmically sound. In the discourse of island studies, the book reveals that the interconnected narratives astutely frame the concept of “belongingness” to a particular nation adrift and afloat. But while the tales and narratives in the book are instructive in understanding the Austronesian world, it is less persuasive in problematizing some fundamental concepts related to power and hegemony. That said, one could raise three inquiries that might lead to productive studies.

First is the usage of terminologies in the entire book that can use more critical reflection and which are not convincingly rendered. For example, the introduction feebly frames the tales in the collection as “stories [that] . . . can be further categorized as folk tales, fairy tales, fables, myths, legends, epics, magic, and wonder tales” (2). A more nuanced discussion of the book’s operational definitions of “fairy tale,” “myth,” and “magic” should be teased out, especially since these terms come with Western and colonial baggage. If “myth” is usually imagined as a widely known false idea or belief and it is used to describe the tales in the collection along with the terms “folktales” and “epics,” where does one draw the line between fabricated stories and stories held to be factual by the folk which tell them? Moreover, Shamsuddin uses the term “animist beliefs” to refer to the belief systems of different ethnolinguistic groups in the Nusantara region. “Animism,” however, is a derogatory term propagated by the colonizers to describe the colonized peoples’ belief systems. Its usage implies and suggests a stage in the evolution of belief systems deemed to exhibit cultural imbalance.

The second concerns the short interpretations that follow each tale in the collection. According to Shamsuddin, “The true meaning of a fairy tale depends on each individual person. Each one . . . will extract a different message from these stories depending on your

own life experiences” (2). This may be a license to read and interpret fairy tales in a way that may be devoid of historical context or a consideration of external forces. Furthermore, the interpretations are intensely engaged in moralistic values and codes of conduct with which the writer could have engaged more rigorously.

This concern leads to the third and final inquiry about the framework used in the book. Albeit it could fashion itself as a children’s book that aims to spread and disseminate different folklores, it is still imperative for her to challenge the disposition that has guided her inclusions and exclusions. What guidelines and standards did she use? In addition, the writer’s ways and practices of retelling these oral and written tales should also be explicated. For instance, one version of “The Hunter and the Seven Swimming Maidens,” from the Dibabawon group in the Philippines, ends, in Hazel Wrigglesworth’s *The Maiden of Many Nations: The Skymaiden Who Married a Man from Earth*, with this utterance: “Tapus on to sugilon ku” (My story is finished).^{*} In *Nusantara*, it was retold as “they lived happily ever after” (10). This kind of retelling is, purportedly, in view of pursuing the conventions and formulas of Western fairy tales. In Shamsuddin’s retelling, the aesthetics of oral traditions and Dibabawon lived realities are frustratingly erased.

These inferences may lead us to the crux of the matter. The world has witnessed how the Nusantara region—with its archipelagos and islands—has endured the different forms and shapes of colonialism, but traces of that fact are not articulated in the collection. *Nusantara* is not postcolonial enough.

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* Hazel J. Wrigglesworth, *The Maiden of Many Nations: The Skymaiden Who Married a Man from Earth* (Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 1991), 98–99.