

ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

THE GIANT MAIDSERVANT_



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In Javanese, *ngalor-ngidul* literally means “from north to south back and forth”. But today, this term refers to a nonsense conversation. This is because we have forgotten that the water of the ocean (to the south) and the sand of the volcano (to the north) began to speak well before humans. We have therefore described the 2006 earthquake and the 2010 eruption in the Yogyakarta province as “natural disasters”. The volcano and the ocean are indeed the last speakers of this language which we no longer understand: *ngalor-ngidul*. Bu Pujo, the shaman woman of the sacred village on Mount Merapi, who died in the eruption, was the last person to speak this language of *tohu-bohu*...

Luckily, there's this almanac of divination, a kind of miraculous survivor that I inherited on the Sunday the rescuers went up to clean the ruins of Bu Pujo's house. After digging in the ashes to a depth of two meters, their spades hit a cupboard. Out of all the debris that smelled of burning and death, Bu Pujo's only daughter Sri did not want to keep anything except a bundle of 2,000 rupiahs [15 cents] that she found nearly intact in a wooden box. It was several years of Bu Pujo's very modest salary as a servant of the Sultan's palace that she'd saved up for her grandchildren. The rescuers found the almanac of divination in this very cupboard, a heap of paper that the fierce volcanic blast had compressed and then cemented within the sand. Sri wanted to get rid of it. So I slipped the almanac into a plastic bag, not really sure why I was taking this relic home.

Like all the houses located within a 20-kilometer radius south-west of Merapi's crater, my place had been invaded by the ashes for several weeks . Once I brought it home, the sheets of paper, sponge-like, absorbed the grey crystals sliding off roof tiles with the rain . Swaddled in the plastic bag like a steam room, the divination almanac had begun to give off a suffocating smell, a mixture of charred humus, sulphurous dust, and putrescent matter . A precipitate of the tragedy . I'd nearly thrown it away, especially since it was only the recent edition of a very common numerology almanac, one of thousands of copies, presenting tables where the lunar and solar days resonated with colours, cardinal points, metals, liquids, trees and plants, birds, divinities, and the position of the dragon that carries and turns the Earth .

This almanac is used for choosing auspicious or ominous days for weddings, for naming newborn babies, for going on pilgrimage, setting up a frame, digging a well, or removing the spell from an ill-born child . I kept it because of Bu Pujo, because of her tohu-bohu words I'd always ignored, now swept away by the hot clouds . Maybe I was hoping that this handbook of highly codified popular magic, incorrectly described as divinatory and bearing no handwritten annotation by Bu Pujo, would one day have the power to restore this language? This hope was insane . But the time of disasters does not discriminate what makes sense from what does not . It is beyond nonsense .

Bu Pujo was neither taller nor bigger than the other village women, but she was something of a giant . She was always at the side of Mbah Marijan, the gatekeeper of the volcano, when offerings were presented once a year at Merapi . She was the one who cooked the benzoin resin, the roses and jasmine petals, and the tin coins on the altar's large stone facing the two statues of Ganesh . Then we'd see her shaking, arms opening upward, the palms of her

hands turned towards the sky . Her gaze piercing the web of the world, seemingly empty, full of a completely different reality . Her speech would become incoherent, off-centre, as if she were immersed in a new syntax, that of the volcano, or in an even higher and more essential sound architecture that no one, even her relatives, could grasp . People would commonly say that she was in a trance and engaged in a conversation with the spirits of Merapi . Actually, she was speaking the language of *tohu-bohu* . At her side, Mbah Marijan would remain silent . Only when she exhausted the trance would the gatekeeper of the volcano utter the Koranic prayer . Then he'd proceed to the inventory of the offerings sent by the Sultan . He was under the command of the Palatine bureaucracy, and Bu Pujo was in the service of cosmic chaos . When the offerings were done, she would disappear from the public space and return to the shade of her home . We'd even forget that we had seen her alongside Mbah Marijan .

The precise title given by the Sultan of Yogyakarta to this old man revered as a sage was “keeper of the key of the Merapi volcano” . Key to what? The palace gates . For Merapi was regarded as a replica of the Sultan palace, except a palace for the dead . Mbah Marijan told me how he'd entered this palace one night in a dream . At that time he wasn't yet gatekeeper of the volcano . He'd climbed up to the “belt”, the border zone between the vegetation and the rock, and had fallen asleep there . In his half-sleep, he had been approached by a very beautiful woman named Lady Green Jasmin, who had offered him a small low stool and opened the palace gates, also green . Inside was the crater of the volcano . There was a vast room full of chairs, all well-ordered, all guarded by a civil servant sitting in front of a table with a book on it . The dream did not say what Mbah Marijan had done with the low stool offered by Dame Green Jasmin .

He might have brought it home at the exit of his dream, because I had noticed that his wife sat on a very similar stool in her kitchen as she peeled vegetables or lit the cooking fire on the ground.

Bu Pujo had never told me about her dreams. I had only once heard her talk about her business with Merapi, when on a stormy evening she had gone up from her house below the village to Mbah Marijan's place. She recounted how, three days after the offering ceremony, she would sneak out of her kitchen and climb the mountain alone, with neither escort nor food supplies. She'd never follow the offering path, but would instead ascend upstream to the Yellow River, enter a thick forest along a rugged ravine towards the Tiger Cave, and then ascend even higher. She would go across a grey torrent known only to her, then to a multicoloured shoreline. There she would pluck two rare flowers growing in the interstices of the stones: the gandapura, and the kalajanna. One was bright red, the other soft green. She'd bring these two rare flowers back to the village with a handful of brimstone, and entrust them to Mbah Marijan, who would then take them to the palace, to the office of ritual affairs, as proof that the ceremony of offerings had been conducted in accordance with protocol. No one had ever accompanied Bu Pujo to this multicoloured shoreline. It was clear that her life was tied to the gandapura and kalajanna flowers, and that even in an emergency she would never leave.

Her stone house served as a shelter for lovers of the volcano, who had invented their own ritual there. When the cold mist cast its soaked shroud over the night, they'd eat a bowl of instant noodles, or drink a glass of very sweet ginger coffee accompanied by steamed peanuts or a fried banana. They would speak then of deconstructing the ugliness of the world and planting in its ruins a vast field of these rare flowers, so that Bu Pujo would no longer have to go so far in the forest

to find them . Then, when their underground conversation ran out, they would wrap themselves in their sarongs and lie down on the large bamboo bench that occupied half of the central room . Huge bamboos, ten or twelve meters long, like no one had ever seen . This was definitely the house of a giant . It was, in fact, the only visible sign of Bu Pujo's gigantism, and all the volcano's lovers would fall asleep with confidence in her gigantic leniency .

When they woke up to climb the volcano, Bu Pujo accompanied them in the cold mist to the big bamboos on the roadside . She had a very special way of saying goodbye to her guests . She would open her arms in an upward movement, the palms of her hands turned towards the sky . Her breath came short, compressing her chest as if it hurt her to see them go, as if they were her own children . It was the same gesture that she made in front of the altar of offerings . Always busy carrying and offering . Caring and offering . By this gesture, she raised all her guests to her gigantic goodness .

But already in the village, people were beginning to say that Bu Pujo was rambling . Now the language of *tohu-bohu* that only she spoke was scary . People also said that burning incense was a satanic act . In the 2009 offerings, Mbah Marijan guided the procession under a golden parasol that no longer lit anything . Behind him, Bu Pujo was unrecognizable . Her head was swathed tightly in a black scarf that obscured her gaze . She did not seem to see the radiant volcano . All the women of the village wore the same black veil and climbed up in a sinister column, while the baskets of rice on their backs trembled with surpassing melancholy . At the upper station of the offerings, the large stone engraved with the palace's emblem was still in place, but the two statues of Ganesh had been beheaded . Fundamentalist Islam had launched its sticky net to the top of the volcano . . .

In the morning just after the eruption of October 26, 2010, Bu Pujo died from her wounds . At this, the volcano disappeared . All that remained in the north was a screen of clouds frozen in fear . It was a great void, a massive cold draft by which the mountain of fire had been whisked away . In the early morning, Merapi disappeared because the one who was carrying it was dead . Yes, Bu Pujo had been carrying the volcano like those heavy baskets of offerings she had loaded on her back on the day of the procession . She cared for the mountain like her own child, with its wonders and its flaws . That's why Bu Pujo looked like a giant .

The next day, she was buried in a mass grave with the thirty-three other villagers of Kinahrejo who had been blown up by the eruption . Mbah Marijan's body was buried on the same day, at the same time, in a separate vault 100 meters upstream . Up to her final resting place, the giant maidservant had remained in the shadows . Who would now speak ngalor-ngidul, the language of tohu-bohu?

A few days later, twenty-one other volcanoes of the archipelago entered a phase of intense activity: the Seulawah Agam, the Sinabung, the Talang, the Kerinci, the Kaba, the Anak Krakatao, the Papandayan, the Slamet, the Bromo, the Semerau, the Batur, the Rinjani, the Sangeang Api, the Rokatenda, the Egon, the Soputan, the Lokon, the Karangetang, the Ibu, the Dukono, and the Gamalama . A strange phenomenon of contagion, like the Javanese trance that seizes a reog dancer then spreads to his comrades . With 17,000 islands and 150 volcanoes located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, the Indonesian people know that their land is nothing more than an irregularity rising from the vagaries of the ocean . Both the Palu earthquake in Celebes on September 28, 2018, along with a tsunami and

a terrifying liquefaction, and the eruption of the Anak Krakatao on December 23 of the same year that triggered an earthquake and another tsunami, have reminded them once again of this prodigious reality of the ephemeral .

(Random excerpts from a book to be published someday
somewhere .)