

Rommel Curaming's *Power and Knowledge in Southeast Asia: State and Scholars in Indonesia and the Philippines*

Ramon Guillermo

University of the Philippines Diliman

Filipino scholarly interest on Indonesia has been developing quite substantially in recent years. Many of the more recent studies have delved into Indonesian literary, cultural, and social history in order to understand Indonesia in itself as well as to gain comparativist perspectives on the Philippines. These oftentimes involve a strictly comparative dimension combined with an appreciation of the multifarious historical and cultural connections between these two nations. Increasingly active translation work from Bahasa Indonesia to Filipino has allowed for a broader and more direct Filipino public reception of Indonesian literature in the Philippines. One must note, however, that for various reasons, this scholarly interest unfortunately seems rather one-sided.

Rommel Curaming's pioneering contributions to the corpus of studies on Indonesia written by Filipinos are numerous and quite significant. His book, *Power and Knowledge in Southeast Asia: State and Scholars in Indonesia and the Philippines* (2019), which is based on his dissertation at the Australian National University (ANU), is an important study of state-sponsored history writing. By comparing two major state-sponsored projects in the writing of national history in Southeast Asia, he also gives a useful comparative overview of the origins and development of the academic discipline of history in the Philippines and Indonesia. The first case study is the project initiated by Philippine dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos which bore the title *Tadhana* (*Fate*). The main intellectual architects of this projected 21-volume history were University of the Philippines historians Zeus A. Salazar and Samuel K. Tan. They were spared no expenses, given access to all necessary resources, and provided substantial financial incentives. This perhaps included a premium for secrecy, because the catch was that the volumes should appear under the name of Marcos himself, who was eager to claim authorship. Despite *Tadhana's* grand ambitions, only four volumes were published from 1973 to 1980. Moreover, probably due to its expensive hardbound format, *Tadhana* ended up having only

very limited circulation among the few bureaucrats and intellectuals interested in what were purportedly Marcos's writings. These volumes virtually disappeared from public view after the overthrow of Marcos in 1986.

The second case study is the *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia* (*National History of Indonesia*, SNI), which was spearheaded by Nugroho Notosusanto, widely regarded as the official historian of Suharto's Orde Baru regime. Desperate to lend some academic credibility to this priority project, Notosusanto convinced Sartono Kartodirdjo, the first and foremost professional historian of Indonesia, as well as other prominent scholars to join the history-writing team. After five years of work, the first complete edition of this six-volume "standard" history was launched in 1975. In contrast with *Tadhana*, the SNI was promoted and distributed extensively by the state and was controversial with the public as well as reviewers almost from the very start.

Curaming brought attention to the differing relationships between scholarship and political interest in his two case studies. On the one hand, he found that the relatively more developed status of the historical discipline in the Philippines at the time did not prevent a more positive convergence between the scholarly directions of the team which wrote *Tadhana* and the demands of Marcos and his New Society. According to Curaming, this is clearly a case where a scholarly project was "enabled" by political exigencies (17). Marcos's early appropriation of the "barangay" coincided well with Salazar's over-arching concept of the indigenous "ethnic state" in *Tadhana*, while Salazar's framework, which represented history as a fraught dialectic between the "nation" and the "state," could easily be rearticulated teleologically to represent the New Society as the (inevitable) culmination of this process of unification. Curaming's discussion is easily the most useful and lucid exposition of the central ideas and methodological contributions of the *Tadhana* project as these converged on crucial points with Marcos's "constitutional authoritarianism." He convincingly refutes Salazar's claim that writing about time periods distant from the contemporary would insulate him from Marcos's politics. Curaming observes that, "Self-satisfied as Salazar was, he could not have been more naïve in his supposition. It was precisely in the indigenous, buried in the very distant past, that the specter of Marcos's political project lurked" (87). In fact, the *Tadhana* outline would hardly be revised in its later iteration as Pantayong Pananaw, the historiographic approach Salazar inaugurated in the '80s. The main change would be that instead of locating the longed-for "historical synthesis" in the New Society, it was instead displaced to the (distant) future wherein the Filipino language would finally attain its potential as the language of national unity. Though Curaming does not remark upon it, the matter of language was also a crucial difference between the *Tadhana* project and the SNI. Marcos, despite his professed "nationalism," would probably have not

found the use of the Filipino language in accord with his inordinate grasping for intellectual prestige and recognition.

On the other hand, Curaming's study unearthed the tensions present throughout the collective process of writing the SNI between Kartodirdjo's preferred Indonesia-centric perspective combined with a structural, multi-dimensional social science approach and the narrative, story-telling approach favored by Notosusanto, which was probably more attuned to the requirements of state propaganda. One of the great contributions of this section is the rigorous and almost philologically exact analysis of the variations between the 1974 and 1984 editions as well as of the textbook versions (1976/1977) of the SNI, which reveals certain telling inconsistencies and conflicting statements in the retelling of the events surrounding the 1965–66 anti-communist massacres in Indonesia. There is here an impressive level of detail and sophisticated analysis which reveals the complex interplay between "politics, scholarship, and chance" (152).

While the reader does gain some insight into how Marcos personally related with the team of scholars writing *Tadhana* as well as how he viewed the project, there is very little in Curaming's research which reveals how Notosusanto related to Suharto and how the latter, for his part, thought of this project. There is a striking lack of symmetry in the statement which calls the dictator Marcos and the military historian Notosusanto as "prime movers" of their respective historical projects (166). If, however, Notosusanto was on a "military mission," as one of Curaming's informants put it, especially in writing the sixth volume on contemporary Indonesian history, to whom did he report? How was the work of the team as a whole evaluated and assessed or even censored? If Notosusanto's mentality was, as another historian involved in the project, Abdurrachman Surjomihardjo, purportedly wrote about him, "asal bapak senang" ("as long as the boss is happy") (116), who was this "bapak" that he had to please? In a 1982 interview, Notosusanto was forthright enough to say that, despite its imperfections, the textbook version of the SNI already satisfied the "requirements set forth by Pak Harto [Bapak Suharto]" (140). One of the historians, Deliar Noer, was even supposedly removed from the project and fired from his teaching job because of some allegedly critical remarks in a draft he had written which angered Suharto (111). This implies that Suharto had at least some oversight role in the project when it came to how he and the New Order were being portrayed.

Where Suharto mostly kept his distance from the SNI historians, there was for Marcos obviously something more deeply personal at stake in this project. Collecting Harley-Davidson bikes was evidently more Suharto's thing and not history writing. Marcos, however, wanted to be perceived by his contemporaries and by posterity as someone who had almost superhuman intellectual and physical abilities. Affixing

his name on the covers of books he had not written was not much different from wearing numerous fake war medals on his chest. Perhaps there was something in the milieu he was brought up in that made him desperately desire intellectual recognition and respectability, regardless of how these were acquired. All he needed was money to pay others to write books for him. However, it is true that Filipino politicians, like their counterparts elsewhere, routinely employ speechwriters and ghostwriters. There is a whole hidden and not-so-hidden history behind this practice. Ghostwriting is an accepted and far from illegal practice in Philippine politics. This practice is widely tolerated and practiced even by top-tier Filipino writers as long as the pay is good. They would say that no one is hurt by one or two well-crafted, throwaway speeches after all. The more specific question perhaps is the difference between ghostwriting a speech for a politician and ghostwriting an ostensibly scholarly treatise. One could also argue that there is a gap between Marcos's more political writings, mainly ghostwritten by Adrian Cristobal, and the purportedly more scholarly *Tadhana* project.

How does one deal with a scholarly history of the Philippines that begins with a lie on the title page where the author's name should be? By voluntarily renouncing formal authorship over their work, the *Tadhana* historians also renounced any intellectual responsibility and transferred this to Marcos. The work therefore lost any kind of academic accountability in terms of its truth claims. Salazar himself admitted playing a role in this farce by mischievously devising a bibliographic essay to be placed at the end of a *Tadhana* volume he wrote which would ostensibly prevent arousing the incredulity of the reader regarding Marcos's familiarity with innumerable historical sources in several languages. It was also known to the participants that all the volumes had to be edited by Juan Tuvera, Marcos's trusted Executive Secretary, to make these conform as closely as possible to Marcos's writing style. Their claim that Marcos's agenda did not in any way impinge upon the substance of their writing is disingenuous, as if the name "Marcos" were only a collective pseudonym. It is true that a valid and original work can indeed be released under a pseudonym for various reasons, including repressive governments. But the name Marcos is not just any ordinary pseudonym. By accepting it, they naturally had to work within certain stated or unstated boundaries and fulfill certain expectations acceptable to the bearer of that name, who was, after all, their patron. As Curaming puts it plainly, "When scholars like Notosusanto and Salazar joined a state-sponsored project, their decision to work for or with the powers-that-be rendered obvious which political side they were on" (172).

Some of the real authors may assert in reply that everyone knew (or at least they made sure that everyone knew), that this was all a charade anyway and that they were the proper authors. But where does the charade start and where does it end? Were these intelligent individuals really naïve enough to believe, holding the first printed volumes in hand, complete with Marcos's little prefatory anecdote about composing history late at night for his children, that the latter would eventually publicly announce the true authors of the work?

Finally, though one is inclined to agree that at least for the key individuals in the *Tadhana* project, the financial aspect was not the most important motivation, it is curious nevertheless why they were not as forthcoming in interviews with Curaming as their minor collaborators were about the actual amounts involved. Why should they be indignant about something which was, in the first place, a supposedly insignificant factor in their involvement? Though Curaming unfortunately does not discuss the complexities of ghostwriting as a practice in Philippine politics, perhaps there is a sense in which they refused to identify themselves with the rampant ghostwriting of the Marcos era. But there is really no other way to describe it. *Tadhana* was ghostwritten by some of the best scholars of the Philippines for Marcos. These ghosts continue to haunt Philippine intellectual life up to the present day.

WORK CITED

Curaming, Rommel. *Power and Knowledge in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, 2019.

Ramon Guillermo (rgguillermo@up.edu.ph) is the director of the Center for International Studies (CIS) at the University of the Philippines Diliman. His current research projects are on the transmission, dissemination, circulation, reception, and translation of radical texts and ideas in Southeast Asia using techniques and approaches from translation studies and digital humanities. He is the author of several books which include *Translation and Revolution: A Study of Jose Rizal's Guillermo Tell* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009), *Pook at Paninindigan: Kritika ng Pantayong Pananaw (Site and Standpoint: A Critique of Pantayong Pananaw)* (UP Press, 2009), and the novel *Ang Makina ni Mang Turing (Mister Turing's Machine)* (UP Press, 2013).