

IN THE ARCHIPELAGO

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Alfred Russel Wallace's ghost lingers in Nusantara. The Welsh naturalist spent eight years in these islands, cataloguing flora, fauna, culture and geography. His findings appeared in *The Malay Archipelago: the Land of the Orang-utan and the Bird of Paradise; a Narrative of Travel with Studies of Man and Nature* (1869), a regional study and travelogue that's widely read to this day. Wallace dedicated the book to Charles Darwin, with whom he co-developed the theory of natural selection.

These islands catalyzed their work. After all, how could one archipelago contain such improbable biodiversity, with Asian species on one side and Austronesian on the other? Wallace proposed that these faunal regions meet at the narrow, choppy strait dividing Bali and Lombok, which has become known as Wallace's line. By grappling with the fact that two similar, adjacent topographies could belong to two distinct zoological provinces—as different, he put it, as “those of Africa and South America”—Wallace pieced together natural selection's role in evolution.¹ He reasoned that this strait's exceptional depth meant that it carried water even when sea levels were at their lowest, and inferred that evolution is determined by geographic boundaries, rather than climatic similarities (as other Victorian naturalists imagined). He sketched his hypothesis after a malarial “flash of insight” in the Maluku Islands, and mailed it to Darwin, prompting his friend to publish *On the Origin of Species* (1859), a foundational work in evolutionary biology.

Wallace left a complex legacy. Born to a working-class family, he referred to himself, late in his life, as a “red-hot radical, land nationalist, socialist, anti-

militarist, etc. etc. etc.” His relationship with his Sarawakian assistant Ali—who lived with him and assumed Wallace's family name—has led some historians to speculate that Wallace, whose wife and family lived in England, was queer.² While he chided imperialism's “wretched failures,” he traveled at its height, and his writings contributed to the scientific racism and civilizing rhetoric of his time.³ In fact, Wallace sought to identify a second line marking an anthropological distinction between Malays and Papuans, locating this between the islands of Sumbawa and Flores.⁴

There are echoes of Wallace's archipelagic outlook in Indonesia's *wawasan nusantara*, or “archipelago concept.” Its roots go back to 1957, when Indonesia claimed the waters between islands as part of its territory, contra international norms. Whereas Wallace mapped irregularities and differences, this set of policies promotes unity. It's a solution to the problem of creating a single state spanning thousands of islands and hundreds of ethnic groups, languages and cultures.

Indonesia's new capital city Nusantara, projected to be completed by the centennial of 2045, takes its name from this philosophy. The multibillion-dollar megaproject, to be funded largely by private investment, will move Indonesia's government from Java, the world's most populous island, to East Kalimantan, the archipelago's midpoint. The contradiction here is that, in the archipelago, there is no center. Édouard Glissant, the Martinican philosopher and poet, writes:

“Every archipelagic thought is a thought of trembling, of non-presumption, but also of openness and sharing. It does not demand that one starts by defining Federations of States, administrative and institutional orders, *it starts everywhere on its work of entangling*, without bothering to state the preliminaries (my emphasis).”⁵

If the archipelago starts everywhere, then Nusantara is a city in the center of a centerless geography.

There is no center, with artworks coming and going over the course of twelve weeks, is an archipelagic exhibition; it's shaped by many currents and eruptions. Albertho Wanma's *Separated Generation* (2023–24) calls attention to rifts in the archipelago. This sculpture depicts a figure—Wanma tells me it's a self-portrait—arched in trance, and suspended in the air by scaffolding. A vertical cut and five horizontal cuts dissect the fiberglass body. The figure's mouth is open, as if screaming. A cable,

¹ Alfred Russel Wallace. *My Life: a Record of Events and Opinions* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1905): 358–59.

² Mark Clement, “Queer Colonial Journeys: Alfred Russel Wallace and Somerset Maugham in the Malay Archipelago,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 2 (2017): 161–87.

³ Wallace, quoted in Jeremy Vetter, “Politics, Paternalism, and Progressive Social Evolution: Observations on Colonial Policy in the Scientific Travels of Alfred Russel Wallace,” *Victorian Review* 41, no. 2 (2015): 126.

⁴ See Fenneke Sysling, “The Human Wallace Line: Racial Science and Political Afterlife,” *Medical History* 63, no. 3 (July 2019): 314–29; and Vetter, “Wallace's Other Line: Human Biogeography and Field Practice in the Eastern Colonial Tropics,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 39, no. 1 (March 2006): 89–123.

⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton, The Glissant Translation Project (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

its tobacco red hue reminiscent of Papuan barkcloth painting, curls around it.

The sculpture references Papuan korwar statues. These wooden carvings, believed to be vessels for ancestral souls, bridge the human and spirit worlds. *Separated Generation* portrays a body caught between these realms. The work probes a predicament felt among the artist's generation in Biak, a group of islands off Papua's northwest coast, where Wanma was born. The Biak language, along with other traditional practices, has fallen out of currency in recent decades, yet many people also feel disenchanting by imported Indonesian national values. Wanma's sculpture wrestles with the dilemmas of living between cultures, and of being denied spiritual wholeness. Although the figure communicates agony, the artwork points to a path to repair. On one hand, the wiry, steel scaffolding speaks to the development, sold as growth, that has proliferated across Indonesia since the New Order, but on the other it symbolizes the cultural reconstruction through which identities can be reclaimed and erasure opposed.

Few have contributed more to Papua's cultural revival than Arnold Ap, who was born in Numfor, Biak. In the 1970s, Ap's band Mambesak, founded with Sam Kapisa, Eddie Mofu and other Papuan musicians, established a repertoire of music from across West Papua, recording at least five volumes of folk songs in some thirty local languages, and publishing a number of these in songbooks. Ap also worked as a curator at Museum Loka Budaya, an anthropological museum at Jayapura's Cenderawasih University. As conveyed by oral history interviews in the documentary *Muman Minggil* (Road to the Ancestors, dir. Yonri Revolt and Mahardika Yudha, 2023), Museum Loka Budaya not only safeguards Papuan artefacts, but was a site of gathering in these years—interviewees recall that it was open late on weekends, hosting performances by Mambesak and other

musicians, and was often humming.

Ap was arrested by Kopassandha, an Indonesian military unit, in November 1983, just one day after Mambesak played for West Papua's governor. On 26 April, 1984, he, Mofu, and two other detainees were found dead on a beach near Jayapura, their bodies showing bullet and stab wounds. Benedict Anderson, in a statement recently echoed by artist Dicky Takndare, ties Ap's murder to his cultural work, writing that "the link between Ap's occupation and assassination is not at all accidental."⁶ Wallace penned twelve chapters of *The Malay Archipelago* about Papua. His scholarship reveals the complicity of science and colonialism. Guitar in hand, Ap settled his ghost by retooling anthropology for Papua, and for Papuans, and was martyred for it. After Ap's death, according to journalist Robin Osborne, the authorities told Mambesak that if they wished to continue performing, they must "sing not of Papuan culture, but of the unity of Indonesia." Many artists fled into exile, or stopped practicing, and it was only after the New Order's fall in 1998 that Papuan art resurged again. Wanma is one of a new generation contributing to this resurgence.

These islands—known to some as Nusantara, and known to others by other names—have long been important due to their location between oceans, between trade winds, between cultures, between faunal regions, and so on. Wanma's entranced figure contends with the political and spiritual fullness of betweenness, and embodies the archipelago's unfixity.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 2006): 178. In a discussion at the Yogyakarta Biennale Foundation's Equator Symposium in 2022, Dicky Takndare said "Arnold Ap was not killed because he took up arms ... He was killed because of his curatorial practice." Ely Kent, Wulan Dirgantoro, and Udeido Collective, "Udeido: Strategically Amplifying Disruptive Papuan Narratives in Indonesia's Art Centre," *World Art* 14, no. 2 (May 3, 2024): 144.