

# **Sailing the Arteries of the Ocean**

**A Proposal to Communicate the Autonomous Struggles of Asia-Pacific**

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6 September 2012

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As we all know, different parts of the world is becoming more and more connected in just one click. With the explosion of Inter-Networking technology, that marked 21<sup>st</sup> century as the age of information revolution, all people from various corners of the globe have come together to upload, download and share data. In this new paradigm, traditional ways of producing meaning collapses inevitably. Mass media is gradually losing its grip as the prime monopoly in distributing information and truth.

With the internet, people from different walks of life are directly participating in producing shared-meanings just like what we did thousands of years ago. Going back in time, it is this process of creating shared-meaning that holds a network of communities together without being necessarily homogenous.

The pre-historic Austronesians or the people of the southern islands of asia-pacific is one example. Despite the complicated geographical location of Austronesians, which is scattered and divided by vast oceans, according to Australian futurologist Marco Cuevas-Hewitt, in his reflection on postcolonialism and geopoetics, “The sea, then, does not constitute a barrier, but rather, a connective tissue crossed by perpetual flows.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, Polynesia and Madagascar regardless of its opposite end locations on the map, culturally share its language and habits with people from Southeast Asia; it’s the ocean that this flow of cultures provided the link.<sup>2</sup>

These culturally shared habits and meanings are in fact subversive in some ways. And this caught the attention of some anti-authoritarian academics like the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber. When asked why Graeber chose Madagascar for his dissertation, he answered, “What I found was they’re incredibly subversive. There’s all these stories about people playing tricks on God. It just seemed like these were people whose attitude I would appreciate.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, an American anthropologist who focuses on subalterns, James Scott, made a book-length anthropological and historical study of the Zomia highlands of Southeast Asia. The book is entitled “The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia”. Zomia is a geographical term first coined by a Dutch historian Willem van Schendel in 2002, it refer to a huge mountain system of mainland Southeast Asia that has historically been beyond the control of governments.<sup>4</sup>

The similar characteristics of Scott’s Zomia and Graeber’s Madagascar is the perpetual rejection of governmental authority by means of retreating rather than confronting the State. Here is Graeber’s observation of the Tsimihety tribe of Madagascar:

“To this day they have maintained a **reputation as masters of evasion**: under the French, administrators would complain that they could send delegations to arrange for labor to build a road near a Tsimihety village, negotiate the terms with apparently cooperative elders, and return with the equipment a week later only to discover the village entirely abandoned—every single inhabitant had moved in with some relative in another part of the country.”<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Scott further describe in his book that, “the tribes in Zomia are **conscious refugees from modernity** itself, choosing to live in more primitive, locally-based economies.” Of course modernity here is described as equated to non-egalitarian relations.

Now, in the age of optic fibers, smart phones and satellite transmissions, these pre-historic anti-authoritarian tradition in Asia-Pacific is obviously still being practiced by indigenous communities. Hopefully the emerging Southeast Asian anarchist movement will have a chance to discover it and finally pull its inspiration from the pre-historic past of our ancestors which I believe is relevant in the present in building our future. From the vast oceans to the infinite web of networks I am hoping that this tradition continues to flow.

The following words in this article aim to propose possibilities, despite the previous failed attempts, to build a nexus of anti-authoritarians in Asia-Pacific.

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<sup>1</sup> “Sketches of an Archipelagic Poetics of Postcolonial Belonging.” Academia.edu  
<[http://uwa.academia.edu/MarcoCuevasHewitt/Papers/997731/Sketches\\_of\\_an\\_Archipelagic\\_Poetics\\_of\\_Postcolonial\\_Belonging](http://uwa.academia.edu/MarcoCuevasHewitt/Papers/997731/Sketches_of_an_Archipelagic_Poetics_of_Postcolonial_Belonging)>

<sup>2</sup> “Ang Mga Magdaragat.” A sparse, sweeping history of the Philippines, a country of islands.  
<<http://www.elaput.org/pinsmgdr.htm>>

<sup>3</sup> “David Graeber on Anarchy, Madagascar and Magic.” Souldish High Frequency Culture.  
<<http://www.souldish.com/2006/05/08/178/>>

<sup>4</sup> “Zomia (Geography).” Wikipedia.  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zomia\\_\(geography\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zomia_(geography))>

<sup>5</sup> “Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology.” Wikipedia.  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fragments\\_of\\_an\\_anarchist\\_anthropology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fragments_of_an_anarchist_anthropology)>

## Autonomous Rhizomes Asia

In May 2008 during a weeklong workshop on activist online video distribution held on the hinterland of West Java, Indonesia, a network of autonomists was born.

Since the workshop was participated by groups and individuals from various parts of Southeast Asia, a handful of like-minded individuals from the workshop had the chance to meet in person and decided to initiate a network of diverse anti-authoritarians and autonomists in Asia-Pacific. The network was later known as Autonomous Rhizomes Asia (ARA). It was modeled after the Asian Anarchist Network (AAN), which is more or less a mailing list of exclusively anarchists. But ARA wanted to be more than a mailing list and likewise a restricted network.

What ARA wanted to achieve, during its early stages is to make a difference in the way of organizing. Ideally, it wanted to emulate a living and breathing shapeless organism that multiply itself rhizomatically, thus, a rhizomatic networking of autonomists, anti-authoritarians, whatever. But this idea is feared by some members that overtime it will equally result to the pit-fall of loose networking that, according to DC (ARA member) in his Protocol 2.0 email, “like the AAN, unfit to make collective decisions”.<sup>6</sup>

Other members, nonetheless agree with DC’s formal consensus proposal but critical to define ARA as something austere:

“Personally, I think the best approach to take would not to be to define ourselves at all, since definitions can be too rigid and enforce a strict ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. Better to just name some ‘points of affinity’; not criteria for membership to which we all must conform, but just some minimal things we all agree on. Within that, there will inevitably be diversity though, which shouldn’t be seen as a bad thing. Jazz in this case would be a good metaphor: a minimal structure over which we could improvise.”<sup>7</sup>

In fact until now ARA has no proper form, it is still in its fluid state and at the moment hibernating yet awaiting for another spark to make its energy flowing. This energy hopefully would like to take in a form of a published journal.

## Wooden Boats: Communicating Our Local Struggles

The talk on conceiving a journal project within ARA came months later after the discussions on defining the network in 2009. However, the people behind the journal project are a mix of ARA and non-ARA individuals, some in fact are from the West who are long-time residents in Southeast Asia.

The general consensus of the proposed journal is to strengthen the network by attempting to actualize the result in concrete forms like solidarity actions and mutual aide within Asia-Pacific and beyond. Just like how our ancestors did from the distant past: flowing perpetually the anti-authoritarian practices in the arteries of the vast oceans.

Metaphorically, I describe the journal as the *Balangay* or pre-historic wooden boat of maritime Southeast Asia that transported subversive ideals to Madagascar, Polynesia and Zomia. Ceaselessly escaping the claws of governments, state and authority. With this concept in mind, ARA would not be limited itself as a simple network:

“To spread news of inspiring struggles is also worthwhile. A lot of people are more empowered to action when they hear about what other people are doing in other places.”<sup>8</sup>

By communicating our local struggles I believe a contemporary grass root brand of anarchism will emerge from the land of our ancestors who brought down Khmer empire, the Majapahit and the maritime empire of Sri-vijaya. Yet, I know at the start there are hurdles to consider but I am optimistic that we can overcome this. Whether if we re-awaken ARA or metamorphose to something else until we master the way of our ancestors.

The journal at the moment is just an idea likewise the network, hopefully with the help of our comrades in Indonesia who already have experience in producing local anti-authoritarian publication like *Apokalips* and *Jurnal Kontinum* we could actualize the remaking of *Balangay* and sail it again into the vast oceans of Malacca, Celebes

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<sup>6</sup> “[ara] Protocol 2.0” ara@lists.riseup.net  
<<https://lists.riseup.net/www/arc/ara/2009-08/msg00007.html>>

<sup>7</sup> “Re: [ara] Protocol 2.0” ara@lists.riseup.net  
<<https://lists.riseup.net/www/arc/ara/2009-08/msg00009.html>>

<sup>8</sup> “Re: [ara] Protocol 2.0” ara@lists.riseup.net  
<<https://lists.riseup.net/www/arc/ara/2009-08/msg00009.html>>

sea, South China sea, Pacific ocean and to the corners of Indian ocean and beyond. Aboard in the *Balangay* or the *Korakora*, together we can drive away the evils of *Manananggal*, *Penanggalan*, *Krasue* and *Ma lai*, among other names or also known as Capitalism.

This primeval desire to communicate is the motivation behind this work. I hope together we create a new shared-meaning in the globality of the new paradigm.#

Tokyo, Japan  
6 September 2012

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