

## **Econarratology and the Outsider/Insider Dynamic in Jajang Agus Sonjaya's *Manusia Langit***

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### **Abstract**

Jajang Agus Sonjaya's *Manusia Langit* (2010) mediates Nias Indigenous epistemology through Mahendra, a Javanese archaeology lecturer whose academic formation embodies the center-periphery knowledge hierarchies the novel sets out to interrogate. This article argues that the novel deploys first-person narration to reproduce, and then progressively dismantle, this epistemological hierarchy. Econarratology is the method that makes this formal tension visible. While existing scholarship on the novel has illuminated what it represents about Nias culture, this article examines how narrative form positions readers in relation to that representation. Through close analysis of free indirect discourse, focalization shift, qualia, and spatialization, the article demonstrates how readers are first implicated in Mahendra's extractive epistemological gaze and then gradually estranged from it. The *adat* critique that emerges from Mahendra's liminal position — formally adopted into the Nias community yet unable to bear *adat*'s full obligatory weight — holds cosmological sophistication and material constraint, sacred landscape and ecological degradation, in the same analytical frame. *Manusia Langit* demonstrates that the ethical representation of Indigenous knowledge requires not only thematic respect but also formal self-awareness of the mediating gaze through which that knowledge reaches readers.

**Keywords:** econarratology, Indonesian literature, Nias culture, postcolonialism, focalization, *adat*.

## Introduction

The representation of Indigenous knowledge in postcolonial literary fiction raises a persistent methodological and ethical question: how does the narrative position through which Indigenous epistemologies are mediated shape what readers can understand about them? This question is not merely one of authorial identity or cultural authority, though both matter. It concerns the formal mechanisms — point of view, focalization, storyworld construction — through which readers are positioned in relation to Indigenous ways of knowing, and whether those mechanisms reproduce or unsettle the hierarchies that have historically subordinated such knowledge to Western rationalist frameworks (Durnin 3–4). As Tuck and Yang argue, dominant representations frequently render Indigenous knowledge passive and extractable, treating cultural systems as objects available for external consumption rather than as living epistemologies with their own internal logics (3). The literary-critical question that follows is: how does narrative form participate in — or work against — this extractive dynamic?

This question carries particular institutional weight in the Indonesian context, where the subordination of regional epistemologies to Javanese-centered frameworks has been reproduced not only through colonial and state policy but through the knowledge structures that shape how literature is produced and received. The concept of *Nusantara* — the archipelagic unity Indonesia claims as its cultural foundation — has historically reflected a Javanese-centric imaginary that marginalizes non-Javanese voices and renders outer-island epistemologies peripheral to national discourse (Simarmata et al. 339). The New Order period (1966–1998) institutionalized these hierarchies through what Aspinall and Fealy describe as “repressive-developmental” governance (4–5): state policies distinguished between modern citizens and *masyarakat terasing*, or “isolated communities,” justifying the exclusion of Indigenous populations from development narratives while positioning Java-based

institutions as arbiters of legitimate knowledge (Grumbly 55; Nugroho 16). Academic disciplines absorbed and reproduced these structures. Archaeology in Indonesia began as a colonial enterprise in which Dutch scholars catalogued artifacts while marginalizing Indigenous contributions to historical knowledge (Bloembergen and Eickhoff 405), and postcolonial universities largely continued treating regional epistemologies as anthropological data rather than as what Marker calls “evolving systems of thought” (505).

The shift toward regional autonomy in the early 2000s created conditions for the reassertion of the cultural and literary value of Indonesia's regional traditions. As Watson observes, regional autonomy laws implemented at the millennium's turn substantially boosted national interest in cultural heritage (1–2). Indonesian literature has been a significant site of this reassertion: Putra identifies the foregrounding of ethnic identities as a key model through which regional literary voices challenge Jakarta-centered narratives, amplifying communities that have long been marginalized within national cultural production (268). It is within this transformed literary landscape that Jajang Agus Sonjaya's *Manusia Langit* (2010) intervenes — and does so in a way that is formally more complex than straightforward regional advocacy.

Sonjaya — an Indonesian archaeologist, environmental activist, and novelist with extensive fieldwork experience in Nias — occupies an authorial position of partial access: deeply familiar with Nias culture but not himself Nias. This positionality mirrors, at the authorial level, the representational problem that *Manusia Langit* stages at the narrative level. Rather than claiming insider authority, Sonjaya structurally foregrounds the mediated nature of his access by routing the entire novel through Mahendra, a Javanese archaeology lecturer from Yogyakarta whose academic formation positions him as a representative of the very center-periphery knowledge hierarchy the novel sets out to interrogate. Mahendra arrives in

the Banuaha community, dismissing its cosmological origin narratives as superstition and its ceremonial practices as obstacles to legitimate research — enacting, in other words, precisely the epistemic subordination that the novel's regional literary context seeks to contest. This narrative choice — routing Indigenous epistemology through a focalizer shaped by the institutional structures that have historically marginalized it — is the novel's central formal and ethical gamble, and it raises the question of whether the mediation it performs ultimately challenges or replicates the hierarchies it names.

Existing scholarship on *Manusia Langit* has documented the novel's cultural and ecological dimensions but has not fully addressed this formal question. Didipu's literary anthropological study identifies six cultural values represented in the novel — including the prestige economy of *lakhōmi* (self-respect) and *sumange* (prestige), the obligations of *adat*/traditional ceremony, and the kinship structures of Banuaha — but focuses on cultural content rather than on how narrative form mediates readers' access to that content (5). Telaumbanua's ecolinguistic analysis demonstrates how specific linguistic features — modal expressions, presuppositions, and lexical choices around terms such as *banua* and *niha* — construct an ecological worldview grounded in Nias cosmology, showing how the novel's language shapes environmental consciousness (52). Purwarno et al. examine the novel's representation of Nias ceremonial practice (140), while Mulayani analyses its mythological dimensions (43). Each of these studies illuminates what *Manusia Langit* represents about Nias. What remains unexamined is how — through what specific narrative mechanisms — the novel positions readers in relation to that representation, and what ideological work that positioning performs as Mahendra moves from dismissal to a critical appreciation of Nias epistemology.

This is precisely where econarratology becomes methodologically necessary and offers analytical leverage that neither postcolonial narrative critique nor ecolinguistics alone can provide. Where Telaumbanua's ecolinguistic framework asks what language says about the environment and the ecological worldviews language constructs, econarratology asks how narrative form — focalization, storyworld construction, the orchestration of spatial and sensory detail — positions readers to experience environmental and epistemological stakes from within a particular consciousness. As James argues, reading is not passive reception but a performative act through which readers construct storyworlds: mediated representations of material and cultural realities that shape environmental imagination and awareness (8). These storyworlds are not neutral. They are filtered through the consciousness of narrators or focalizing characters, and in *Manusia Langit*, that filter is Mahendra's — initially skeptical, institutionally conditioned, and gradually but never completely transformed.

Von Mossner's work on affective ecologies establishes that narrative environments do more than provide settings; they shape the emotional and cognitive responses through which readers develop environmental consciousness (195). Prieto's account of spatialization — the descriptive processes through which texts enable readers to simulate place mentally — further clarifies how spatial detail in fiction carries ideological weight, reflecting the values and limitations of the consciousness through which it is rendered (20). Together, these frameworks enable a reading of *Manusia Langit* that attends not only to what Nias cosmology, *adat*, and landscape mean, but also to how Mahendra's shifting focalization constructs, constrains, and gradually expands the storyworld through which readers encounter them.

This article argues that *Manusia Langit* uses first-person narration through a Javanese outsider to reproduce, and then progressively dismantle, the centre-periphery epistemological

hierarchy it thematically critiques. Econarratological analysis tracks formal shifts in focalization, spatialization, and qualia as Mahendra moves from detached researcher to community participant. Through this tracking, the analysis reveals how readers are first positioned within an extractive gaze and then estranged from it.

The analysis proceeds in two sections. The first section examines how the outsider/insider dynamic is negotiated through Mahendra's cultural transition. It focuses on specific moments where narrative form — free indirect discourse, sensory detail, temporal distance — enacts rather than merely describes his epistemological repositioning. It also attends to how Nias characters, particularly Ama Budi, actively control what the outsider is permitted to know. The second section examines how place immersion and *adat* critique are constructed through spatialization. The same narrative mechanisms that deepen Mahendra's attachment to Banuaha's landscape also position readers to recognize *adat*'s constraining dimensions: its economic burdens, obligations, and its ecological pressures. This occurs without reducing Nias cultural practice to either a primitive vestige or a romantic alternative. Together, these analyses demonstrate that ethical representation of Indigenous knowledge requires not only thematic respect but also formal self-awareness of the mediating gaze through which that knowledge reaches readers.

### **Negotiating the Outsider/Insider Dynamic in *Manusia Langit***

*Manusia Langit* deploys first-person narration in a way that does more than grant readers access to Mahendra's perspective — it structurally implicates them in the epistemological hierarchy he embodies. The distinction matters for econarratological analysis. Von Mossner argues that first-person narration positions readers not as observers of a character's responses

to their environment but as inhabitants of those responses (93). In *Manusia Langit*, this inhabitation is not neutral. Readers enter a consciousness shaped by decades of institutional conditioning that positions Nias epistemology as inferior to Javanese academic rationalism — and they do so without the retrospective distance that would allow them to recognise that conditioning from outside. Understanding how this works requires attention to three converging formal techniques: the collapse of narratorial distance in immediate scene narration, the ideological encoding of free indirect discourse, and the strategic withholding of affective qualia that marks the outsider's relationship to place.

The Sky People exchange extends this dynamic from immediate perception to cosmological interpretation. When Mahendra asks Ama Budi about the origins of the Nias people, the following exchange unfolds:

"Our ancestors were not from Asia but from the sky!"

"Yes, Ama, I mean from the sky." I do not want to argue about this sensitive issue. I suspect that pickaxes and pots characterize the lives of Neolithic people who carry ancestor worship traditions with megaliths as one of the media. They came to the archipelago and displaced the humans who had come before, who lived off hunting and gathering food in the jungle. (Sonjaya 122)

Ama Budi's assertion is direct and unqualified — a statement of cosmological fact, not an invitation to debate. Mahendra's verbal response performs agreement while his internal monologue simultaneously performs erasure. The free indirect discourse carrying his Neolithic migration sequence presents epistemic translation as a scholarly reflex, unmarked and unremarked. The gap between what he says aloud and what he thinks is itself a formal enactment of the center-periphery dynamic: outward deference, inward subordination.

Readers inhabiting his consciousness experience the Sky People narrative not as cosmological knowledge awaiting engagement but as data awaiting explanation — precisely the extractive relationship that Tuck and Yang identify as characteristic of dominant representations of Indigenous epistemology (3). The storyworld has been shaped, before readers are aware of it, by a consciousness that cannot yet read what it is seeing.

Nevertheless, the novel does not allow this hierarchical storyworld to remain unchallenged. The mechanism of that challenge is not, however, Mahendra's gradual goodwill — it is the active epistemological agency of Nias characters operating directly on the narrative's information structure. This is most visible in the moment readers might least expect it: not in Ama Budi's teachings, but in his refusals. When Mahendra, now more genuinely curious, asks Ama Budi to recount the *hoho* — the sacred oral narrative of Nias origins — the elder's response is carefully conditional:

"It is in the *hoho*, the sacred one."

"Do you remember it, Ama?"

"Yes, I do. But it is not something you can recite whenever or to anyone. However, maybe I can share the gist of it with you, Nak Hendra." (Sonjaya 110–11)

This is an act of epistemological gatekeeping. Ama Budi does not withhold out of reticence or incapacity — he explicitly confirms that he remembers the *hoho* in full. What he withholds is access, calibrated precisely to what the outsider has earned the right to receive. The *hoho* is not available for extraction; it is dispensed on Nias terms, in partial form, at the elder's discretion. This has direct consequences for the storyworld readers inhabit. They do not receive the *hoho* as Ama Budi knows it. They receive what Ama Budi judges Mahendra ready to hear — a gist, not the sacred whole. Nias epistemological authority thus operates not

only thematically but formally, shaping the novel's information structure from within. The center-periphery dynamic that Mahendra's focalization initially enforces is here inverted: it is the Nias elder, not the Javanese academic, who controls what knowledge circulates and how it circulates.

This dynamic is further crystallised in the episode Didipu identifies as the novel's most concrete marker of Mahendra's insider transition: his formal adoption into Ama Budi's clan and the conferral of the name "Mahendra Hia" (126). The adoption is conducted on *adat's* own terms — a ceremony requiring community consensus, family presence, and public ratification. It is the community's act, not Mahendra's achievement. However, even after this formal incorporation, Mahendra reflects: "I have yet to embrace the customs of Ama Budi, for I am not, or perhaps cannot yet be, an actual Nias person" (Sonjaya 129). The tension here is analytically productive. Formal adoption grants Mahendra a Nias clan identity within *adat's* own framework — a degree of belonging the novel marks as genuine. However, it does not dissolve his liminality; it clarifies where that liminality actually lies. What remains beyond him is not knowledge or affection but the full weight of *adat's* obligations — the ceremonial debts, the economic burdens, the social pressures that belonging in Banuaha fully entails. His position is transformed but not resolved, and it is precisely this irresolution that equips him — and through him, readers — to engage Nias epistemology with critical appreciation rather than either dismissal or romanticization.

The formal shift in Mahendra's narration after he becomes a teacher is registered at the level of prose texture. Where the eagle omen scene withheld affective qualia entirely, rendering Banuaha as a field site observed from analytical distance, the narration that follows his role change accumulates precisely the sensory and spatial detail that was previously absent. He records waking to the sound of pigs being fed, walking the same paths to the

schoolhouse, and learning which families gather at the river on which days. The storyworld readers construct alongside him shifts accordingly: Banuaha is no longer a site to be excavated but a place to be inhabited. As Indriyanto and Kasih demonstrate in their econarratological analysis of diasporic fiction, this kind of accumulated spatial detail performs a specific narrative function: it transforms space — abstract, unmapped, available for extraction — into place, a site imbued with affective and cultural meaning through sustained habitation (354). This is the formal mechanism through which place attachment is built in fiction — not through declaration but through the slow accretion of qualia that James and Morel identify as the primary means by which readers simulate narrative environments (4).

The Gomo River passage crystallises this transformation. Sitting by the river on stones he once catalogued as archaeological artifacts, Mahendra reflects:

From birth to death, the people of Banuaha are connected and bound to the stone. It is only natural that the world recognizes the Nias people as a megalithic society. As time passed in Banuaha, I began to uncover some of life's deeper meanings. I longed to be as steadfast as a rock in my silence and as fluid as water in motion. I wanted to let myself flow, unconcerned with where it would ultimately settle. Isn't that the essence of life? Ama Budi taught me much about living like a stone (Sonjaya 96).

The passage enacts what Tuan terms *topophilia* — the affective bond between people and their surroundings that produces a felt sense of place (4). The stones are no longer objects to be classified but presences to be inhabited. Crucially, this is no longer free indirect discourse encoding a hierarchical framework — no unmarked translation of Nias epistemology into Western categories. The reflection is qualia in the precise econarratological sense: the subjective, embodied experience of place reshaping consciousness in ways that readers

simulate alongside the focalizing character. Mahendra's focalization imbues the fictional environment with meaning in accordance with his background and ideological outlook (Indriyanto and Darmawan 69). The Gomo River passage does not argue for the validity of Nias epistemology — it constructs a storyworld in which that validity is sensorially evident.

This expansion of the storyworld makes the cosmological concept of *banua* accessible in a way that earlier narration foreclosed. *Banua* holds dual significance in Nias cosmology: it denotes both the earthly realm and heaven, encoding the inseparability of terrestrial and celestial domains as the foundation of Nias identity (Gustanto et al. 12; Feldman 37). *Niha*, meaning "human being," completes the cosmological dyad: the Nias people call themselves *Ono Niha* (children of the human) and their land *Tano Niha* (land of people), grounding collective identity in both place and personhood. As Telaumbanua demonstrates, these are not merely lexical items but cosmologically embedded expressions through which the people's relationship to their environment is constructed and sustained — terms that carry what he calls an "ecological worldview" encoded in the language itself (52). In the novel's early chapters, these concepts appear within a storyworld shaped by Mahendra's rationalist focalization — registered as cultural data, translated into anthropological categories. By the Gomo River, the same concepts are encountered through a consciousness that has been spatially and sensorially transformed. When Mahendra reflects that "Banuaha — *banua niha*, human village — encodes the aspiration of 'how we become human'" (Sonjaya 111), readers are positioned to receive this not as ethnographic information but as a claim about the relationship between place, identity, and knowledge that the narrative has made experientially legible. The storyworld has expanded to accommodate a different epistemological framework — one that the novel's opening chapters had structurally foreclosed.

This sensory and cosmological reorientation is confirmed when Mahendra returns to Ama Budi with the same question about the Sky People that he had earlier resolved through archaeological recoding. Ama Budi's pedagogical mode is itself significant here — he does not lecture but models, transmitting knowledge through sustained participation in place rather than propositional instruction. The *hoho* exchange that follows measures how completely Mahendra's focalization has shifted:

In one of the *hoho* stories about the origin of the Nias people, it is said that Sirao, the ancestor of the Nias people, was sent down to Earth from the sky, from the *tete holi ana'a* (the upper heavens). Sirao was the child born from the union of two winds on Earth. The process of their union is described in detail, much like a human marriage and pregnancy. (Sonjaya 110–11)

Where the earlier Sky People exchange produced free indirect discourse that immediately recoded cosmological claims into archaeological categories, no such recoding occurs here. Sirao descending from *tete holi ana'a*, born from the union of winds, is received without translation — the narrative renders no internal monologue of pickaxes and pots, only attentive listening. This absence is itself a formal marker of transformation. The storyworld readers now inhabit is one in which Nias cosmology can be encountered on its own terms, not because the novel argues for its validity but because the focalizing consciousness has been, through place immersion and sustained mentorship, fundamentally reshaped. It is this depth of attachment, however, that makes Mahendra's subsequent critical perspective on *adat* credible rather than condescending — a point the following section examines.

### **Mediating Tradition and Landscape: A Critique of *Adat***

*Adat* in *Manusia Langit* is not introduced as an abstract system of rules but as the social and ceremonial expression of the same cosmological relationship to place that Mahendra has come to understand through immersion. The *banua* cosmology — with its insistence that Banuaha is not merely a geographical location but a site of ongoing human becoming — generates obligations as well as meanings. To inhabit this place is to participate in its ceremonial life, and at the center of that ceremonial life is the pig. The theological grounding for this is explicit in Nias cosmological tradition: before Christianity's arrival, the Nias people understood themselves as creations of the gods, sometimes calling themselves "the Pigs of the Gods" — "human beings were the pigs of Lowalangi and Laturedano. The humans were at the complete mercy of the Gods, just like the Pigs on Earth are at the mercy of humans" (Telaumbanua et al. 14).

This cosmological self-understanding made pig sacrifice not a cultural preference but a theological necessity: the principle of *mate bawi mate gego* — without the death of a pig, no problem can be resolved — encodes the cosmological logic through which sacrifice maintains balance between human and divine orders. Although Christianity has largely replaced pre-Christian belief in contemporary Nias, the practice persists through syncretism, now sustained by the values of *lakhõmi* (self-respect) and *sumange* (prestige) that measure social standing by one's capacity to host ceremonies and sacrifice in quantity (Wiradyana 13). *Adat's* material demands are therefore not separable from its cosmological foundations — they are their direct social expression.

The ceremony most central to this rendering is the *mangowasa* — the highest *pesta adat* through which leadership authority is publicly validated. What Purwarno et al. establish, and what the novel dramatizes, is that *adat* authority operates through an escalating ceremonial logic in which each threshold crossed remains insufficient until the highest obligation is fulfilled. Ama Budi recounts this sequence directly: "Family and relatives finally

pushed me to make a party. I cut 30 pigs to confirm my status as head of the village. Still, my voice is not heard" (Sonjaya 101). The thirty pigs — a substantial sacrifice by any measure — do not purchase legitimacy. They only establish the precondition for the next demand. Ama Budi continues:

*Adat* has decreed that those who have followed the customs, held the feasts, and whose voices are heard in the village can claim authority... Yes, for the sake of custom, I did it, but it took three years after becoming village chief to be able to host it. Hundreds of pigs and tens of grams of gold were sacrificed, and sacks of rice were given up to feed the crowd that came to the seven-day, seven-night feast. (Sonjaya 101)

The narrative mode here is retrospective direct speech — Ama Budi recounting past obligation to Mahendra, who records it through first-person narration. Unlike the eagle omen scene, where readers inhabited Mahendra's dismissal in real time, this account arrives through a double retrospective: Ama Budi looking back on years of ceremonial obligation, Mahendra transmitting that account from his own transformed vantage point. The distance accumulates rather than diminishes the weight. Readers receive the *mangowasa* not as a single event but as the culmination of years of deferred legitimacy — rendered through the material specificity of its demands: hundreds of pigs, gold measured in grams, rice counted in sacks, seven continuous days and nights of feasting. The storyworld constructed through these details is one in which *adat* authority is real, earned, and extraordinarily costly.

What the spatialization of this account makes visible — through the accumulation of material detail that von Mossner identifies as the mechanism through which narrative environments acquire affective weight (195) — is that the *mangowasa* is inseparable from the same landscape that anchored Mahendra's place attachment. The Gomo River, which taught him to "live like a stone," is, as Purwarno et al. confirm, the sacred site of the Sky People's descent — the cosmological ground from which *adat*'s obligations derive their authority

(724). The ceremony that depletes Ama Budi's resources is not separable from the place that deepened Mahendra's understanding. Sacred meaning and material burden inhabit the same space. This is the tension the novel refuses to resolve — and the following move examines how it extends from the social to the ecological.

The burden *adat* imposes is not, however, simply the cost of maintaining cultural identity against external pressures. It is, more precisely, a constraint generated from within the community's own epistemological framework — a point the novel makes visible through Ama Budi's particular predicament. Ama Budi was himself among those who established the customary rules that now bind him, “his words, his rules, have ensnared himself” (123). This detail is analytically crucial. It prevents the critique from becoming a condescending outsider observation about primitive irrationality. *Adat*'s constraints are self-generated, recognised as burdensome by their own authors, and yet sustained because the epistemological framework that produces them also produces the community's sense of identity, continuity, and belonging. Otto observes that tradition operates through ‘a mix of voluntarism and social control’ that is ‘negotiated and contested’ (3); Ama Budi likewise contests the burden privately while publicly upholding the system that created it.

This self-binding character of *adat* is further complicated by the redistributive logic that Purwarno et al. identify within the *owasa* system. Prestige in Banuaha, they note, “is not measured by the amount of accumulated wealth, but by its ability to accumulate wealth to be shared” (722). The hundreds of pigs sacrificed at *mangowasa* are not destroyed — they are distributed, feeding the community across seven days and nights. *Adat*'s resource demands simultaneously strain the host and sustain the collective. This redistributive function means that the ceremony's economic burden cannot be evaluated in isolation: what appears from outside as conspicuous expenditure is, from within Banuaha's epistemological framework, a mechanism of social cohesion and collective care. Mahendra's liminal position allows him —

and, through his focalization, readers — to hold both registers simultaneously: the genuine social function and the genuine personal cost.

Nevertheless, the novel does not allow this recognition to settle into equilibrium. The ecological dimension of *adat's* resource demands introduces a pressure that redistribution cannot absorb. Telaumbanua's ecolinguistic analysis identifies a passage in the novel that the econarratological reading must engage directly: the flooding of the Gomo River caused by deforestation for rubber, chocolate, and patchouli cultivation:

Floods that often occur in the Gomo River keep students from reaching school for several hours, and even when the flood recedes, it does not recede all day. According to parents' stories, there used to be very few floods. Since natural forests were replaced by rubber, chocolate, and patchouli plantations, floods began to occur more frequently because forests could no longer hold and store water. (Sonjaya 132–33)

The Gomo River — the sacred site of the Sky People's descent, the place where Mahendra sat on ancestral stones and learned to "live like a stone" — is now ecologically degraded. The same river that carried cosmological meaning sufficient to reshape a Javanese academic's epistemological orientation is regularly impassable to schoolchildren. Telaumbanua reads this as a "destructive discourse" — the replacement of forest with cash crops prioritising short-term economic gain over ecological sustainability (55). From an econarratological perspective, the passage does something formally significant as well: it places ecological degradation within the same storyworld that the novel has built around sacred place attachment, forcing readers to hold the river's cosmological significance and its material vulnerability in the same frame. The landscape cannot be romanticized because the narrative has made its degradation sensorially present.

The house-building ceremony further complicates the material costs of *adat*. Traditional Nias houses require large *sinuringi* logs, but as Sayani explains, "large logs that

no longer exist in the forest” have made construction increasingly difficult (Sonjaya 12). The ceremonial material culture that embodies *adat's* relationship to place is being undermined by the very economic pressures that *adat's* resource demands help generate. The ecological and the ceremonial are locked in a circuit of mutual depletion: *adat* requires resources the landscape increasingly cannot provide, while the economic pressures driving that depletion are partly fuelled by the need to meet ceremonial obligations. This is not a contradiction that sits outside *adat* — it is one that the novel, through Mahendra's increasingly place-attached focalization, renders as internal to the tradition itself.

What emerges from this analysis is a storyworld in which *adat* cannot be evaluated through any single lens. It is simultaneously a sophisticated epistemological system rooted in sacred place, a redistributive social mechanism sustaining community cohesion, a self-binding set of obligations that its own architects recognise as burdensome, and a system whose material demands contribute to the ecological degradation of the landscape from which it derives its authority. The novel does not resolve these tensions. It renders them — through spatialization, through the accumulation of material detail, through the convergence of sacred and degraded in the same geographical space — as the lived complexity of a tradition that is neither primitive vestige nor pristine alternative to modernity's failures.

The tensions *adat* generates — between cosmological depth and material burden, between redistributive care and ecological depletion — find their sharpest articulation in Mahendra's own position within the community he has come to inhabit. His formal adoption into Ama Budi's clan, documented by Didipu, represents the novel's most concrete test of the outsider/insider boundary. The adoption is conducted entirely on *adat's* own terms: community consensus, family ratification, public ceremony. Mahendra is given the name "Mahendra Hia," acquiring clan identity within the very system whose demands the novel has been examining. This is the community's act, not his achievement — Nias epistemological

authority conferring belonging on its own conditions. However, even after this formal incorporation, Mahendra reflects:

I have yet to embrace the customs of Ama Budi, for I am not, or perhaps cannot yet be, an actual Nias person. I remain Mahendra, someone still learning to live within the environment and culture of the Nias people, trying to navigate this earthly life. Like a hermit or a caterpillar turning into a cocoon, I hope that one day, after enduring this exhausting journey, I will emerge better, transformed by my life. (Sonjaya 129)

The free indirect texture of this reflection — the hedging of "or perhaps cannot yet be," the caterpillar metaphor suspended between transformation and incompleteness — marks a narratorial self-awareness distinct from both the early dismissals and the later cosmological appreciation. Mahendra does not claim that *adat* is wrong, nor that his appreciation of Nias epistemology is insufficient. What he acknowledges is that full insider status requires bearing *adat's* full weight — the ceremonial debts, the economic obligations, the social pressures that the *mangowasa* sequence enacts — and that this weight remains structurally beyond him. The adoption granted him a name and a clan; it did not and could not grant him the years of accumulated obligation that make that name meaningful within *adat's* own logic.

This liminal position is the novel's deliberate ethical strategy rather than a narrative failure. Mahendra positioned close enough to Banuaha's cosmological and social life to understand *adat* from within its own logic, yet not so fully bound by it as to be unable to recognise its pressures — occupies precisely the vantage point from which the novel's critique becomes possible without becoming condescending. He can register the *mangowasa's* theological necessity and its economic toll simultaneously. He can recognise the Gomo River as both a sacred cosmological site and an ecologically degraded waterway. He can appreciate the redistributive function of pig sacrifice while witnessing the strain it imposes on families whose daily subsistence is secondary to the demands of *sumange*. None

of these recognitions cancels the others. As Giddens argues, identity is continuously constructed through reflexive engagement with changing circumstances (125), and Mahendra's reflection by the Gomo River — "I longed to be as steadfast as a rock in my silence and as fluid as water in motion" — captures precisely this: a self in ongoing formation, shaped by place without being dissolved into it.

When Mahendra finally departs Banuaha, the novel's formal choices reinforce this irresolution. The departing narration renders the landscape in the same sensory register that characterised his deepest place attachment — mountains, birdsong, the detailed texture of the path — but now observed from the threshold of leaving:

The footpath I traversed while leaving Hilinata was no different than it had been two years ago when I first walked upon it. Time seemed to stand still in this remote interior... Throughout my journey away from Hilinata, my gaze wandered across the detailed landscape of the mountains, across the natural world that had taught me so many lessons. (Sonjaya 184)

The unchanged landscape and the transformed perceiver together constitute the novel's final econarratological statement. The storyworld readers have constructed through Mahendra's shifting focalization does not resolve into either celebration or critique of Nias culture. It holds, in the same frame, the cosmological sophistication that reshaped a Javanese academic's understanding of knowledge and place, and the material, social, and ecological pressures that sophistication generates. Sonjaya's decision to route this complexity through a Javanese outsider — mirroring his own authorial position of partial access — means that the novel's representation of Nias epistemology is always already marked as mediated, incomplete, and conditional. This is not a limitation but its ethical core. *Manusia Langit* insists that respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge requires neither the extractive certainty of Mahendra's early archaeological gaze nor the uncritical romanticization that postcolonial

recuperation sometimes substitutes for it, but the sustained, place-tested, self-aware attention that liminality, when honestly inhabited, makes possible.

### **Conclusion**

This article argues that *Manusia Langit* employs first-person narration through a Javanese outsider to reproduce structurally — and then progressively dismantle — the center-periphery epistemological hierarchy it thematically critiques. Econarratological analysis has made this formal dimension visible in ways that existing scholarship has not fully addressed: where other scholars illuminate what the novel represents about Nias culture, this article has examined how narrative form — free indirect discourse, focalization shift, qualia, spatialization — positions readers within that representation and performs ideological work in doing so. The eagle omen's evacuated qualia, the Neolithic migration sequence's unmarked free indirect discourse, the material accumulation of the *mangowasa* account, the convergence of sacred and degraded in the Gomo River — these are formal constructions, not merely thematic elements, and their analysis reveals that the novel's ethical ambition is enacted through its form rather than stated in its content.

Central to that ambition is the liminal position the novel constructs — for Mahendra, and by extension for Sonjaya himself as a non-Nias author writing from partial access. Mahendra's formal adoption as "Mahendra Hia" grants belonging on *adat's* own terms, yet his acknowledgment that he "cannot yet be a true Nias person" marks the limits that honest mediation requires. The novel does not pretend to deliver Nias epistemology whole. It delivers it as it can be received — partially, through a transforming consciousness, on conditions set by Nias characters themselves. This incompleteness is not a failure of representation but its ethical core. *Manusia Langit* demonstrates that respectful engagement

with Indigenous knowledge demands formal self-awareness about the mediating gaze through which that knowledge reaches readers — a demand that extends beyond this novel to postcolonial literary representation more broadly.

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