

# GENIUS LOCI: TRANSFORMING THE CULTURAL- INTO ARCHITECTURAL-DISCIPLINE<sup>1</sup>

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Genius Loci received its rationalistic architectural position through Christian Norberg-Schulz's phenomenal book "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture". From Wikipedia we find that Genius Loci can simply be understood as 'spirit of place'. Certainly, we will not discuss elaboratively about Norberg-Schulz's work, for I think it is more interesting if we elucidate Genius Loci so as to cover the without-writing tradition society. As mentioned by Claude Levi-Strauss, the society is comprised of those writing tradition and those without-writing tradition. We may say oral tradition for the latter tradition. These societies differ only because one relies on orality and the other relies on writing as a medium to express thoughts and knowledge. The affirmation of equality between the oral community and the written community has great implications, namely the opening of opportunities for equality between oral knowledge and written knowledge. From the studies that I have done, it can be seen that this equality of knowledge becomes difficult to find because each one uses a different set of reasoning and logic. Just a very small example is that the writing tradition relies on one meaning for a phrase or sentence. The phrase "ayah, aku jatuh" (father, I fall) has different meaning from "ayah aku, jatuh" (my father, fall). The comma made the phrase differs in its meaning. In oral tradition, that phrase is written as "ayahakujatuh", no comma and no space between each word. Firstly, we will ask whether what is written is a word, a phrase or a sentence. We have to speculate the possible words that are written. 'ayahaku jatuh', 'ayah, aku jatuh' and 'ayah aku, jatuh' are phrases configured from the 'ayahakujatuh'. Once the words are known, we must try to interpret the meaning of this row of words. The last two phrases is already understood its meaning. The first phrase means there is someone named Ayahaku, falls down.

The example gives a very clear differentiation between writing tradition and without-writing tradition (oral tradition): statement from without-writing tradition demanded a full interpretation, even can be one of personal interpretation. The writing tradition, on the other hand, tend to avoid interpretation because every phrase or sentence should be self-explanatory in its meaning. The nature of multiple interpretation has basically turn the writing tradition to reject the rationality of the without-writing tradition. Taken into broader implication, the understanding upon without- writing tradition calls for a mode of critical thinking or logical thinking approach in uncovering the rationality (and meaning).

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## Cases for Spirit of Place

It is important to define firmly what 'spirit of place' is. We may understand it as the spirit who resides at the place, the place's power and properties, the natural elements which giving spirit to the place, the guardian or protector of the place. Through examinations upon that without writing tradition we may allow ourselves to understand that there are interpretations from Nusantara Architecture which satisfy one of those possible meanings of spirit of place.

### 1. Order and Orientation

Among those without –writing tradition people, it is common to find that their cosmology and beliefs is pair of mountain—sea, upstream—downstream and dawn wind—dusk wind. They are essential in ordering and orienting the site and the buildings.

Such cosmology is said to be one form of cultural knowledge of the without-writing community. With this cosmology, the community develop the site layout and location. A site is developed through following one of the existing cosmologies, The length of the site is defined by referring to that cosmology. Now, if we want to look at it, the cosmology stated by the without- writing community does not have much disputes with the currency that applies in setting direction and purpose. What this means? This means that it is a patch, a place has the potential or ability to 'set' the direction of longitude or direction of latitude of a plot of land; can be longitudinal to the sea or upstream-downstream, or the transverse direction of the dawn-dusk wind. Then, it becomes clear that what in culture is called cosmology turns out to be order, orientation or layout in terms of architecture. So, if the written community is known to have a north-east-south-west orientation, then in the oral community it is known that the oceans, upstream-downstream and the east-west winds are known. Translation of orientation from without-writing into writing tradition will only eliminate the "memory" of relationship between nature and community.

Further observation upon this cosmology shows that each cosmological pair conceal memory of the community. The pair mountain-sea is called by people who are already agrarian or have become settled communities, no longer in migratory nature. Upstream-downstream pair seems to point to people who still tend to move, because they use the upstream and downstream directions of the river as their course. The movement, furthermore, has already taken place on an island, not across the island; it can also happen to people whose movements follow the river flow from upstream to downstream or vice versa. Finally, the dawn-dusk winds are quite dominant in the maritime community. The direction of the dawn-wind (*angin barat*, in Indonesian) refers to the direction of the wind which often brings danger, and therefore better to stay on land alone. The direction of the dawn-wind (*angin timur*, in Indonesian) is the opposite, being the right time to go fishing or for various purposes, including traveling and migration. This all makes a patch of potential have the potential to develop orientation and keep memories of the condition of the community (agrarian society, migrated society, maritime society). Substitution of this cosmological pair into north-east-south-west compass will only eliminate the spirit of the place.

## 2. Source of Life

Eating and drinking are two basic needs for life. In a two-season climate system, it is possible to eat and drink which are provided by nature. Various plants and herbs can be found in various places in Nusantara; and they can be obtained by not having to cultivate seriously or professionally. The meat obtained from hunting also does not require extraordinary effort to get and consume; more or less like getting plants there. There is even signs that meat is more reserved for festivals and rituals, less often for daily consumption. The need to drink, certainly is fulfilled from the body of waters like the river, lake or natural pond. Indeed, for wells as a source of water, there is an extra effort that must be made that is to make excavations with depths that sometimes reach more than ten meters deep. Especially in terms of water sources, in East Java and Bali there is even a place of water which is not only a source of drinking water, but also as a place for bathing and washing. In order to maintain the viability of this water source (usually called 'patirtan'), particular sacred value is awarded to this place. Hence, this *patirtan* it also becomes the spirit of place. The availability of source for food and drink on the site or around the site is a 'luxury' in itself, so it is not surprising that they are made spirit of place. There are rules and taboos that accompany the existence of plant and water is just a real example of the status of spirit of place. indeed, here can be debated, who first becomes spirit of place: order and orientation or the source of life. Apart from the debates that may arise, there is no doubt that the order, orientation and source of life are spirit of place.

## 3. Landmark and Accent

Not every place has natural objects that show particular characteristics or privileges. For example, banyan tree is one kind of tree that cannot grow arbitrarily in every place. This banyan tree posture also shows its peculiarity, namely a big tree with large sheltering leaves, with roots dangling from tree branches to the ground. This large tree has no big fruits, on the contrary, the fruit of the banyan tree is in the size of a marble. Another natural object that also has distinctiveness is a large or big stone. The size of this stone can be as big as two people who hug the stone. Together with the banyan tree, this rock can not be found anywhere in a residential or village environment. The peculiarities of these two objects are then managed to become landmarks of the village, or can also be used as an accent from a journey through the village.

Furthermore, because it is a distinctive object, care, maintenance and care are required by the village. Among the Javanese countryside in the past, the effort was carried out in a very 'smart' way, and involved all villagers, especially the men. The villagers have an obligation to take responsibility for caring and maintaining and the landmark. Birth day of the male villagers which is a combination of Javanese calendar with European calendar has been used as a reference. For Thursday-*pon*, for example, Pak A gets the assignment; so every 35 days, Mr. A will carry out his duties. In carrying out this task, Pak A is obliged to respect this landmark. he also had to leave evidence that he had carried out his duties on that Thursday-*pon*. With gestures that show respect, not a few scientists believe that Pak A is carrying out religious rituals. This assumption was further reinforced by the action of Pak A who put on a 'offering' (*sesajen*, in Jawanese)

which was considered by the scientists as part of the respective ritual. About this offering, it is not impossible if this object is simply a proof or signature that Mr. A has carried out his duties. Being a landmark or environmental accent is a normal thing of an environment. The environment will be more valuable and meaningful in the presence of this object. There is no objection to say that the value and meaning of the object has become the spirit of place from the village. The action of Pak A carrying out his responsibilities is not a religious ritual act, but merely an act of carrying out the obligation to maintain and care for objects.

#### **4. Monuments**

Although on this day Surabaya has become a metropolis, in a number of places in this city there can still be found tombs of someone who (once) got a certain place in the village community.

The many tombs at the same time indicate that Surabaya was once so many villages that slowly form each other to form the city of Surabaya. The tomb of respected people has become a distinctive environmental marker. The pioneers who are usually the first to open and inhabit the village, usually preserved into a tomb that is respected and given high sacred values by the local community. Those who are respected do not have to be in the status of heroes or prominent figures in the village or surrounding villages. This respect and judgment is expressed by carrying out actual religious activities. Here, we see a difference between landmarks and accents with tombs. Although different, but this tomb or monument is also a protector, guardian of the village, as a spirit of place.

From the above-mentioned cases we know that, insofar, each topic is well mentioned in anthropology or culture as belief system and as cosmology. This is also what the writing tradition follows in describing any community. Supported by the architectural meaning of spirit of place, the cases demonstrate that the topic is now transformed anthropological, geographical and cultural topics into architectural topics. It is the logical interpretation of the topic that transformation is operated. Furthermore, we interpret the topic through the employment of community's language and logic, not of our logic. This interpretation as method of transforming the topic turns the non-architectural topic into one of architectural ones. We may also say this is transformation as translation: from anthropological language and logic in understanding the without-writing tradition into one of architectural. Such a transformation also means that topic which is formerly non-architectural is now becomes one of architectural topic. What is more important is that any topic which is found in without-writing tradition may be understood in a way that is common to the writing tradition.

One question is waiting for answer, why the topic is not within the discipline of architecture? To answer this question, we may put our attention to what Nikolaus Pevsner said: "Lincoln Cathedral is architecture; bicycle shed is a building". Under this definition, the artifacts that fall within those of without-writing tradition are categorized as building, not architecture. Since those artifacts are not architectural, the discipline of anthropology, ethnography, geography and culture placed it within their discipline. Since we now has successfully understand the topic as architectural (as spirit of place, *genius loci*) we may taken the definition of Pevsner aside. Artifacts of without-writing tradition are architecture, not

building (to follow Pevsner). Wood as building materials in Nusantara architecture is no more one factor in categorization which one is architecture and which else is building.

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