*State of Nature Conservation in Malaysia 2025, 669–677*
doi: 10.62613/sonc2025.v3ipc05

## CHAPTER 5

# The Enchanted Forest: Exploring Indigenous imaginaries and narratives of nature

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**Abstract:** With the looming threat from destruction of natural landscapes from mineral prospecting, logging, plantations, and others, perhaps it is about time conservationists recognise a true ally in Indigenous communities. Overlapping landscapes that serve both conservation visions and Indigenous claims for rights are grounds for collaboration. A true alliance has to be premised on respect for diverse 'rationales' on understanding nature and the recognition of Indigenous rights. This chapter explores themes on Orang Asli re-claiming authority and legitimacy for Indigenous knowledge in the discourse on nature through (re)telling stories of encounters in an animated landscape.

## INTRODUCTION

"*There is a battle 'for truth' or at least 'around truth'—it being understood again that by truth I do not mean the 'ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted', but rather 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true'*."

(Adapted from Olsson 2010, p. 67 [citing Foucault, in Rabinow 1984, p. 418]).

"*These relations (between the Batek and the environment) actively alter ecological composition and contribute to the apparent diversity of the forest and might thus be incorporated into resource-management programs. But such possibilities are excluded from official representations of the national park. Because the park originated as a wildlife reserve, people can only be seen as an annoyance and a potentially destructive force*."

(Lye 2011, p. 56).

How do we move towards developing a 'true' collaboration between conservation actors with Orang Asli communities? Borrowing from Foucault (Olsen 2010) and Lye (2011), this paper asks conservationists to reassess Western authoritative knowledge on nature, reconsiders human networks in framing relationships between people and nature, and discusses the contemporary goals of conservation in Malaysian conservation discourse. It suggests that we look to Indigenous knowledge for an alternative truth or knowledge towards reimagining an alternative discourse on nature as new ways to understand these relationships. Looking at their way of 'knowing' nature, and how they understand human relationships with nature, a different way of conservation can be envisioned.

By recognising the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge about nature, we are not proposing the rejection of Western discourse, but rather recognising the role of power and/or politics in the conventional discourse on nature, and attempting to change how we see the relationship of power between human and nature, as well as between different human actors in conservation/customary landscapes.

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Conventional conservation discourse talks about building partnerships with Orang Asli in conservation. However, without recognition of Indigenous knowledge as a regime of truth, how do we move towards actual and effective collaboration between conservation NGOs and Indigenous Peoples?

Looking at Indigenous narratives, it is easy to see that Orang Asli paints nature as being an animated space that can be understood as fanciful. However, nature provides interactive spaces—where human beings, flora, and fauna co-exist without necessarily placing one on top of the other in a rigid hierarchy.

Drawing from different sources, this paper aims to offer a decolonised perch from which to engage a new discourse on nature, albeit one more local and inclusive. The discussion centres on materials from three academic references which focuses on the narrative by a Semai elder of the Eagle *gunig*, the Jahai narrative of the *Ceboh* tigers, and a community leader from Kampung Kejar, on his account of the Jahai's experience in the Royal Belum State Park. The source for discussion include:

i. A Semai narrative of visiting a spirit familiar in the forest in Geruntum, adapted from Kamal (2024) *An Enchanted Landscape: Rethinking 'irrational ideas' of human relations to nature*;
ii. Tiger tales from the Jahai in Royal Belum, adapted from Hamzah *et al.* (2023) *'Tigers are our sons': Jahai perspectives in understanding tiger conservation in the Royal Belum State Park, Perak, Malaysia*; and,
iii. A village leader's narrative of Jahai living in the Royal Belum State Park, adapted from Kamal (2020) *Conflicts between Orang Asli Rights and Needs, Economic Development, and Conservation in Peninsular Malaysia*.

## THE STORY OF THE EAGLE *GUNIG*

The following story was narrated by a Semai elder from Kampung Geruntum, who as a child visited his grandfather's *gunig* (spirit guide). His grandfather was a *pawang* (shaman), and the *gunig* was an eagle by the name of "*Wah Se Ngayun*", who lived in a large *Ara* (fig) tree in the forest. It was after a healing ritual that they asked if they could visit the *gunig* at her home. She said that they could. The next day, a small group came along to visit the *gunig*. The elder explains that the forest then had a clear path, because the community actively opened *selai* (orchards), and he remembers seeing big trees along this forest path. Upon reaching the *Ara* tree, his grandfather gave out a cry (*ki-ah*) and the surroundings transformed into a beautiful space with a big house. They were greeted by *Wah Se Ngayun*, who took the form of a beautiful, well-dressed woman who wore "… a fine kebaya". Inside the house, the grandfather asked about *Wah Se Ngayun*'s husband, to which she replied that he was away at sea and her daughters were locked in their rooms. Bah Singung looked up to me and explained, "*Anak-anak perempuan dia lawa, tapi hantu* (the daughters were pretty but they were ghosts)!"

The house was described as big and beautiful, while underneath it, ducks and geese were reared in cages. The group were invited to a feast. When asked what the food was like, his face lit up. "*Sedap* (tasty)!" After a few hours, the group got up to leave. The *gunig* invited them stay a bit longer, until five in the evening. But his grandfather decided to leave because he did not want to be there after it got dark as he was scared. A few steps away from the house, the grandfather gave another *ki-ah* cry. Now the surroundings transformed back into forest. He looked back in the direction of the house and instead saw a large *Ara* tree with bees buzzing around it.

## CEBOH TIGERS: THE SONS AND PROTECTORS OF THE JAHAI

The term '*ceboh*' for the Jahai refers to a magical stone with healing and supernatural powers. They narrate that only shamans can acquire *ceboh* and transfer the powers to other human and non-human beings. *Ceboh* is described as 'cooling', 'located in the heart' and 'able to help with sickness and protection'. A shaman usually first acquires or transfers the healing and supernatural powers via a ritual called *sewang* or *pinglun* which is performed communally. During *pinglun*, a shaman enters and travels through a magical realm via dreams. In this dream-like realm, the shaman meets with spirits of animals and past shamans. Through this ritual, a shaman can transfer the *ceboh* to animals in the forest (e.g., deers, elephants, and tigers) to protect Jahai people in the forest from dangers including threats from materially real and deadly animals. In transferring *ceboh* to a tiger cub, a shamans 'adopts' the cub, taking care of their *ceboh* tiger 'sons' and training them with spiritual powers to become their protectors. Tigers who have acquired *ceboh* are considered as 'tamed' and will follow orders given by their 'fathers' (i.e., shamans). The *ceboh* tigers are said to 'stay with their fathers'—though not seen in physical form—at night and go roam in the forest during the day following the instructions or protection tasks given by their 'fathers'.

## A COMMUNITY LEADER'S ACCOUNT OF HOW THE JAHAI EXPERIENCE THE ROYAL BELUM STATE PARK

The community leader explains the Jahai imaginary of the creation and rights of Jahai in the Belum landscape. He explained that long ago there were no trees in the Royal Belum State Park and that the Creator had ordered their ancestors to grow trees. The same was done for populating the streams with *kelah* and *tengas* fish. He goes on to explain, as if to reinforce, that the true Belum is not here but somewhere else, and that those who know the truth are the true custodians. The Jahai are thus considered the true custodians and others should not venture deeper into the Belum.

He considers tourists, park officials, as well as anyone who enters without permission from the Jahai as trespassers. He explains that outsiders come to the landscape and set up there with lies told to officials far away in Kuala Lumpur, without consent from him or the people living there. But he explains further that the Jahai do not like to fight. He described the soil as a carpet or mat that they do not fight over. The land in his opinion belongs to the Almighty as with every other resource in the landscape. He reminds me that we only live here on this planet on borrowed time and space, and when the time comes, the Raja Tanah will revoke our rights to the land. Then we can only lift our hands in despair.

To him the forest is populated by spirits. These can be malevolent or benevolent spirits, where some cause harm, while others bring about the flowering of fruit trees. Tigers are not simply predators, but are regulators ensuring order in the chaotic landscape of the forest.

The Jahai live within the customary rules of the landscape, by what the creater has prescribed. They take what is allowed for them to eat and sell which forms part of their livelihood. He reiterates that others should stay out of their area. He does not like that the Orang Asli are being referred to as poachers when he feels that armed poachers enter the State park through the Banding jetty. He uses exageration as a narrative tool to reemphasise the real threat to conservation is outside encroachment and that these armed poachers hunt barking deer and other animals in the forest to extinction. They also observe prospectors going deeper into the landscapes diving in the river with torchlights to look for minerals. He denies the claims that Orang Asli benefit from eco-tourism in the Royal Belum. Rather, he says they simply get the crumbs of what is left.

He further claims that the landscape is theirs and that from colonial rule, they were entrusted to look after the area. He ends by simply reasserting their rights over Belum as their customary landscape. They want to continue to express their rights to hunt, fish, and to gather natural resources in the landscape. They also want to be able to sell these resources as a source of income for their families and the communities. He reemphasises, "We provide for ourselves by gathering. We gather *ubi garam*, *ubi kapor*, *ubi thali*, whether life is hard, whether we are poor, we follow our customary ways. Those who help the government get the incentives and those who do not help the government receive nothing in return. Nevertheless, it is okay, we rely on gathering. Our natural resources should not be restricted; we don't like hearing these things."

## DISCUSSION

Adapting Ingold's (2011) 'meshwork' metaphor of life, the Orang Asli imagination of nature necessitates that humans recognise the lived life as aligned with being a part of the construction of nature, and that the threads or lines on which nature draws itself is the very path on which humans traverse, and give human life its meaning. Take away nature and we are left with a devoid life. Life has no way of making its existence beyond the 'meshwork' that exists along these lines of nature. What are these threads or lines which define nature? I would suggest it is the sum that makes up the world which occupies space and time. Humans cannot exist by themselves, while nature cannot exist as merely inanimate objects at the service of humans. Human life necessarily occurs as we move along these lines of an animated nature. Thus, the Orang Asli enchantment of nature gives back to us our experience of being alive.

We must do away with the false dichotomy of Nature versus Culture or Animal/Plant versus Humans, as one cannot exist if the other is not experienced. The experience between these categories is not dissimilar to how we experience a friendship—both having agency, the choice on how to engage and to have the ability to take away from the experience—something we may think of as what makes us human, as being alive. The shift from looking at nature as sub-ordinate and inanimate, to one of having the capacity for life (not just agency), changes our view of nature. Nature is not something we catalogue and define external to ourselves, but should be a conscientious entity we engage with, seek for consent, and offer rights and recognition. This way, we appreciate nature, and not just the iconic forms of nature, such as an apex predator, or what some term "high valued ecological sites", but to recognise all nature as life and to accord respect for them in the same way we accord respect for our friends and fellow humans. This is not simply making "human" of the "non-human", or the anthropomorphisation of things, but perhaps the inverse of it, to see that all we consider "human", exists in a fundamental form of life in all objects of nature.

The first and second narratives on the eagle *gunig* and tiger *ceboh* offer us a different way of 'seeing' relationships between inhabitants of the forest, the forest, and the people. In the first narrative, the story is narrated by a Semai elder based on his personal experience when he was a child following his grandfather to visit the *gunig*'s domicile. At the command of the grandfather, the *Ara* tree transforms into a mansion and the eagle becomes a woman. He describes the story from the perspective of a first-hand account. The narrative is not symbolic or metaphorical, rather explained as a matter of fact. Similarly, the tiger *ceboh* continues as practice rooted in the practical demands to co-exist with tigers in the rainforest. The Jahai narrating on the adopted spectral tigers do so with sincerity and clarity. This is their truth. The truth imagined of the forest, the plants, animals, and people, which exist as a meshwork centred on the central conception of life.

The third narrative on the Jahai in the Royal Belum State Park is strategic and political. Through the researcher, the community leader speaks directly to power. The narrative is clearly crafted to draw on legitimacy of claims from knowledge (knowing the true name and true place of the landscape) and to draw legitimacy from time — of how the Jahai created the landscape which made the Royal Belum State Park so attractive for eco-tourism, ultimately tracing a lineage of authority legitimising Jahai claims of rights in the landscape. He doesn't just tell us a story—a version of 'Indigenous traditional knowledge'—rather he crafts for us a narrative as deeds of claims. Drawing claims of the Jahai people as custodian of the Belum forest, he invokes God and British colonial authority, to assert his statement, which essentially is, '*Stay out, this is my peoples land*.' His narrative reminds of Foucault's approach to discourse as power, in which power is relational and fluid. In providing the narrative of Belum, the community leader questions the authority of the Perak State Parks Corporation (PSPC) over the Royal Belum State Park by offering an alternative narrative.

The Jahai narrative challenges the authoritative regime of 'truth' by offering an alternative discourse. By claiming the name is misplaced, but by also refraining to offer the correct name to avoid misappropriation, he challenges the authenticity of authority while protecting the Jahai's political leverage over the landscape. He then further undermines the conventional narrative of power by drawing on an earlier 'social contract' (between the Jahai and the Creator). Later, he draws on another social contract, one of a more recent timeline (between the Jahai and the British colonial authority). The narrative, supported by proof of claims such as knowing the true name of the landscape, of having the story of origins of the landscape, and from a British colonial badge *in lieu* of a '*surat kuasa*' (power of attorney) as authorising the Jahai to oversee the landscape, reinforces an alternative discourse of the Jahai people as custodians of the customary landscape.

This narrative addresses the landscape as being neither devoid or unclaimed, but having meaning and place to a specific people and with clearly understood and established relations. The Jahai exists within the same narrative of the creation of land. The battle over claims and rights, are not simply old, but have adapted to time, framed within the contemporary notions of being Indigenous. The Jahai claim to the landscape is being the first and original settlers, and as being custodians because they are allies to those imbued with power, be it the Almighty creator or the British colonial government, are founded on a moral authority. Their claims to rights are based on their social contract with the creator, the feudal authority and colonial authority. Their rights are as Indigenous Peoples who continue to practice their traditional way of life that is embedded and dependent on the landscape. The landscape they claimed as their customary land and territory is a specific ecological space which is clearly demarcated and separated from other customary claimed areas.

In looking at the state of conservation in the 21st century, Malaysian conservationists need to ask themselves about what they do and how they do conservation today. Have we done enough and are we framing conservation in the best possible way with the aim of safeguarding our collective future? Seeing conservation as something instrumental to human survival lacks the moral authority and positionality for deeper engagement with nature. However, borrowing from the Orang Asli worldview, which frames their culture—a holistic view of their religion, customary knowledge, and relationships—recognises a fundamental truth, whereby nature is enchanted. As Lye (2011) points out, the challenge with collaboration between conservation authorities, conservation NGOs, and indigenous communities lies now with those in authority. Policies need to be formulated and rights recognised to bring both nature and Indigenous peoples to the conversation (Sheema *et al.* 2013). This is not a new concept, but it will be a paradigmatic shift for our policymakers and civil society actors.

## CONCLUSION

"*It all began with the question of what it means to say of human beings that they are the producers of their lives. But I did not cease thinking about this question as it gave birth to another: how is it that, in producing their lives, humans create history? How, if at all, is this history to be distinguished from the process of evolution in which all living creatures are supposed to be caught up? Nor did I cease thinking about history as I began to see, in what I called the perspective of dwelling, a way to overcome the entrenched division between the 'two worlds' of nature and society, and to re-embed human being and becoming within the continuum of the lifeworld. And I have not ceased thinking about dwelling in my current explorations in the comparative anthropology of the line, which grew from the realisation that every being is instantiated in the world as a path of movement along a way of life.*"

(Ingold 2011, p. 4).

The significance of customary land to the Indigenous person has often been explained and easily understood in a material sense, as a living pharmacy, an open grocery store, a tool shed, and much more. But customary landscapes are also spaces where memories are created and embedded across time. Names of places, avoidance taboos, originate from actual events, which over time become mythologised. Knowing the landscape is also rooted in sensory experiences. Walking, touching, and talking about the landscape, such as the Semai elder account from his childhood, opens a floodgate of images of a landscape which today has been transformed. Yet not only has the landscape changed, the man himself has also changed. Thus, the encounter of the Indigenous with nature is also one which is non-material. Ingold's (2011) terms to understand the human experience as producers, on dwelling and the lifeworld invites us to reflect further on the meaning and experience of being alive.

Applying a critical lens (possibly post-modern/post-colonial) offers potentially creative ways for us to understand nature. It moves away from the objectification and disenchantment of nature and realises creative and critical ways to see human relations with the natural world. The Orang Asli ontology of nature returns the enchantment into ways we understand, experience, and appreciate the aesthetics of nature. Looking at 'life' as the central concept holding all beings together, rather than to project human traits onto the natural world to give agency to animals and plants, changes how we imagine relationships across species and with non-animated objects. A life has agency, whatever form it may exist. The freedom to interact and behave as we do with other humans, takes place in dreams, where the life-force of beings, both animate and non-animate, can interact with one another, closing the gap not just between things, but also between beings across time. Thus, in dreams one can speak to ancestors, to elephants, to plants, etc. One communicates, interacts, and learns from the other without any one necessarily being superior or inferior. If there are hierarchies, these are relational rather than fixed categories imposed. The world in dreams is not divided between humans and the rest, rather it is a space of meshwork holding one and all together in a messy entangled relationship of life.

This way of seeing nature and humans away from the binary opposition recognises co-dependency and much more. One of it being that humans are intricately and intrinsically part of the imagination of nature. Humans like other beings are (in)formed by life, and from which gives meaning and value to existence. The modernist discourse in insisting upon binary oppositions, such as separating people from nature, parks from productive landscapes, is artificial and false. We can learn from the Orang Asli in that what we seek to protect through sustainability and conservation is not separate from us. It is part of an intricate meshwork of lines which, when untangled, reveals how deeply our experiences and identities are connected to the survival of ourselves, our families, communities, societies, nations, and ultimately, our species.

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**Figure 1.** Productive landscape: Whose vision of a landscape? Temiar man in Gua Musang.



**Figure 2.** A Concept of Nature: Musa explaining the significance of the Temiar headgear where the flowers hold sacred meaning to the ideal state of life are formed in a circle crowning the head. In Kampung Bering, Gua Musang.



**Figure 3.** The struggle for recognition: Temiar men holding up a customary map of Pos Gob outside the Bar council.