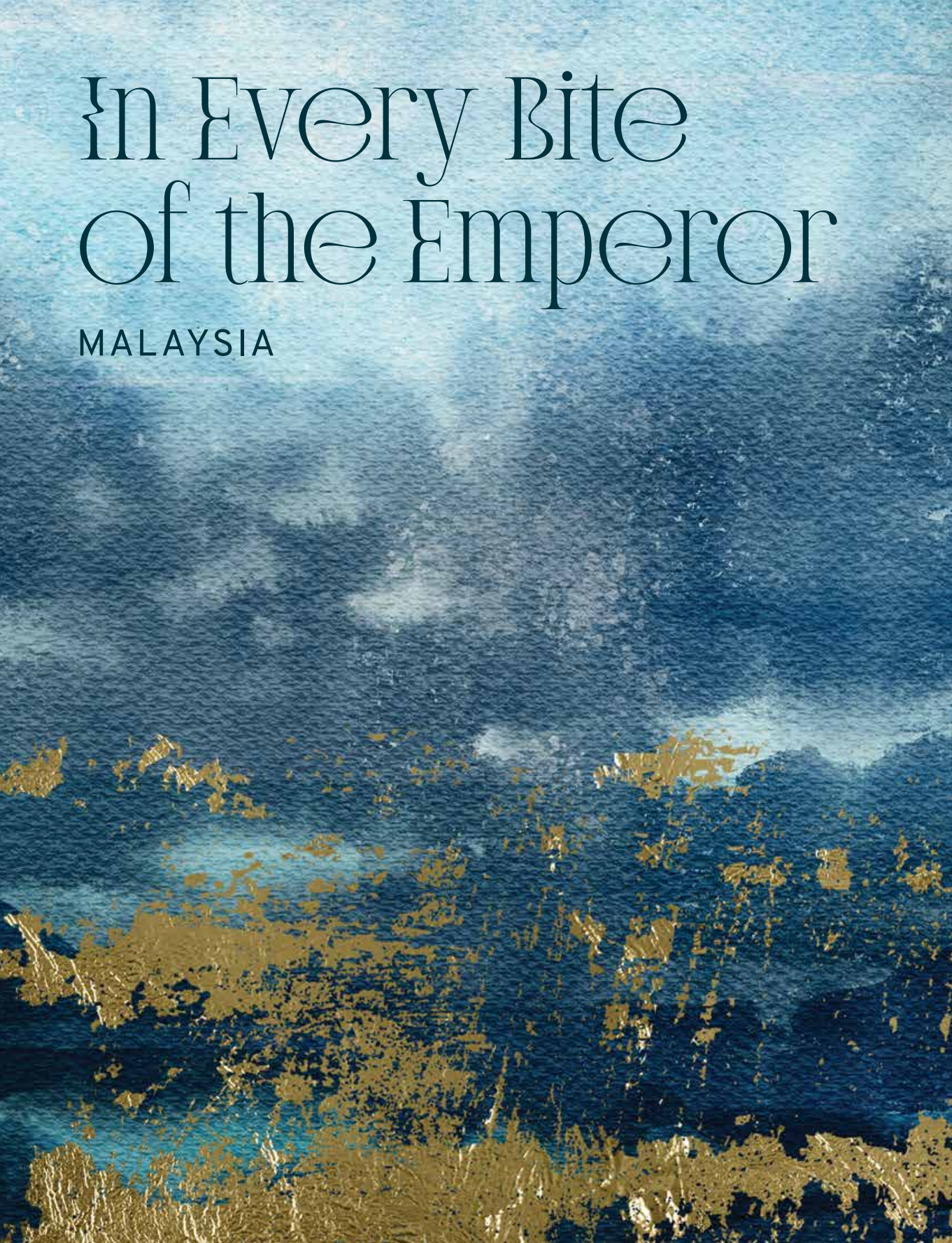
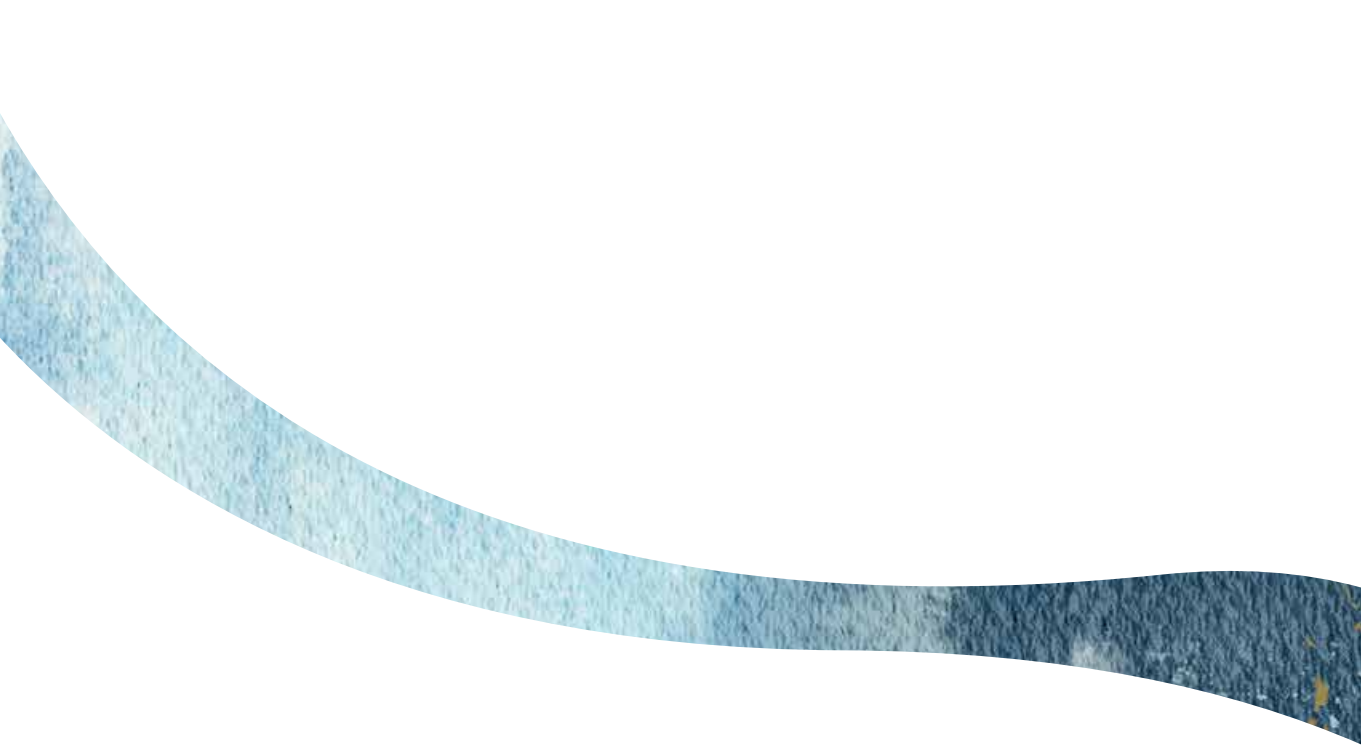


In Every Bite Of the Emperor

MALAYSIA





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GERIMIS Art Project, 2023.

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In Every Bite Of the Emperor

MALAYSIA



Research & Writing by Youngsook Choi & Wen Di Sia

Ecological Grief as Climate Interrogation

In Every Bite of the Emperor is an ongoing long-term project about ecological grief. It weaves transnational narratives and attempts interspecies healing around damaged lands and their broken communities. Grief here stands beyond mourning and sadness over the loss. The project provokes grief as the process of collective interrogation, more like a socio-political autopsy - what are the structural conditions repeating the similar crisis, loss and trauma everywhere? Judith Butler states that grief has been instrumentalised in enhancing existing socio-political structures by valuing certain lives above others. Hence grief is granted only for the deaths of these valued lives, while other losses are not acknowledged, and therefore, violence towards disvalued lives (or non-lives) continues. Ecological violence sits on this unequally distributed grievability, as we often naturalise the hierarchy that sustains modern civilisation and the global economy over the immense loss of other species and indigenous communities who see themselves as part of ecosystems. Grief is a matter of equity, and in this sense, grief could be the critical leverage for social change through this holding space for critical interrogation and reimagining different futures of what-if.

Above all, this project is about resisting the separation of humanity from nature and recovering the lost connection towards interspecies solidarity. As Joshua Barnett eloquently puts it, 'ecological grief both confirms and affirms that we are not, finally, alone'.

Weaving through the channel of grief, *In Every Bite of the Emperor* constellates multiple sites across the globe. The starting point is Collier Moss in North England. Colliers Moss was a clay pit when most containers were made of clay as no plastics or glass were available. Then, also known as Bold Moss, it became a coal mining field absorbing 9 million tons of toxic spoil for 23 years. In more recent years, it was the backyard of glass manufacturing. Despite a series of destructive industrial activities, the land has been recovering in the last 20-something years. It truly manifests the resilience of nature. However, one small part of the land refuses to grow anything. It is still mourning and determined to hold the evidence of the history of exploitation. It demands witnessing and untimed time for healing.

Colliers Moss is not ready to move on.



But how do we grieve for environmental loss and ongoing climate violence? We hardly understand how to communicate with other species. We barely listen to them.

Our rational thinking, reasoning process and evidence-based narratives have evolved through this separation of humans from all other beings in the first place. What are other knowledge systems out there? What are the alternative methods of interspecies healing going beyond conservation schemes? This quest lands us in Malaysia, where human-non-human symbiotic cosmologies still exist in practice amongst Orang Asli communities in parallel with continuing neo/colonial exploitation of the land.

In early 2023, I had the privilege to visit the mining sites and indigenous communities in Malaysia. I would not have made much out of it if I didn't set up the partnership with the local organisation, GERIMIS. GERIMIS has developed extensive research and archives around Orang Asli communities. Wen Di Sia, the founder and researcher, shares what we excavated in our research trip.

Orang Asli communities maintain relationships with other species and surrounding ecosystems through spiritual practices. Mapping rivers, mountains and fruit trees through the songs received from the spirit guides in dreams is one inspiring example that the story of tending and tendering nature is their topological system rather than numeric measurement. They often look at one's illness as a consequence of losing the spiritual balance between different species. Therefore the cure needs to seek the answer from the spirit guide by the shamanic holding of the community space for receiving spiritual guidance. It's not surprising Orang Asli communities are adamant keepers of the rainforest. The ever-shrinking rainforest still exists in Malaysia only because of them.



However, the intense extractive system has been threatening the customary lands of Orang Asli communities and their symbiotic relationships with other-than-human cohabitants. The green dead yard of palm oil plantations is everywhere and expanding. Historically, Malaysia was the largest tin producer under British colonial rule. Kinta Valley in Perak bears numerous scars from permanently damaging tin dredging on its landscape. Currently, quartz mining is in fierce action, stripping off trees and grinding down rocky mountains. And Pahang, where gold mining destroyed the ecosystem and part of the rainforest is surviving regardless, suffers from heavy timber logging and hence the increased human-elephant conflict. **The land is still holding but how long?**

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Introduction

by Wen Di Sia

From the coasts to the remotest highlands of Peninsular Malaysia live groups of culturally and linguistically distinct people, commonly known as Orang Asli. They are descendents of the earliest inhabitants of the peninsula, with history that spans prehistoric times.





Orang Asli =
Original People



Orang Asli a collective term for 19 indigenous ethnic groups, classified under:

Semang/Negrito

Batek, Jahai,
Kensiu, Kintak,
Mendriq, Lanoh

Senoi

Mah Meri, Temiar,
Semai, Semaq Beri,
Chewong, Jah Hut

Proto-Malay

Temuan, Orang Seletar,
Temoq, Semelai,
Jakun, Orang Kanak,
Orang Kuala

These terms and group names are introduced by anthropologists and administrators for official purposes.

Among their own groups, most Orang Asli refer to themselves, in their own languages, as 'people' or 'humans'.

Although there is a large number of Orang Asli groups, they only make up less than 1% of the population...

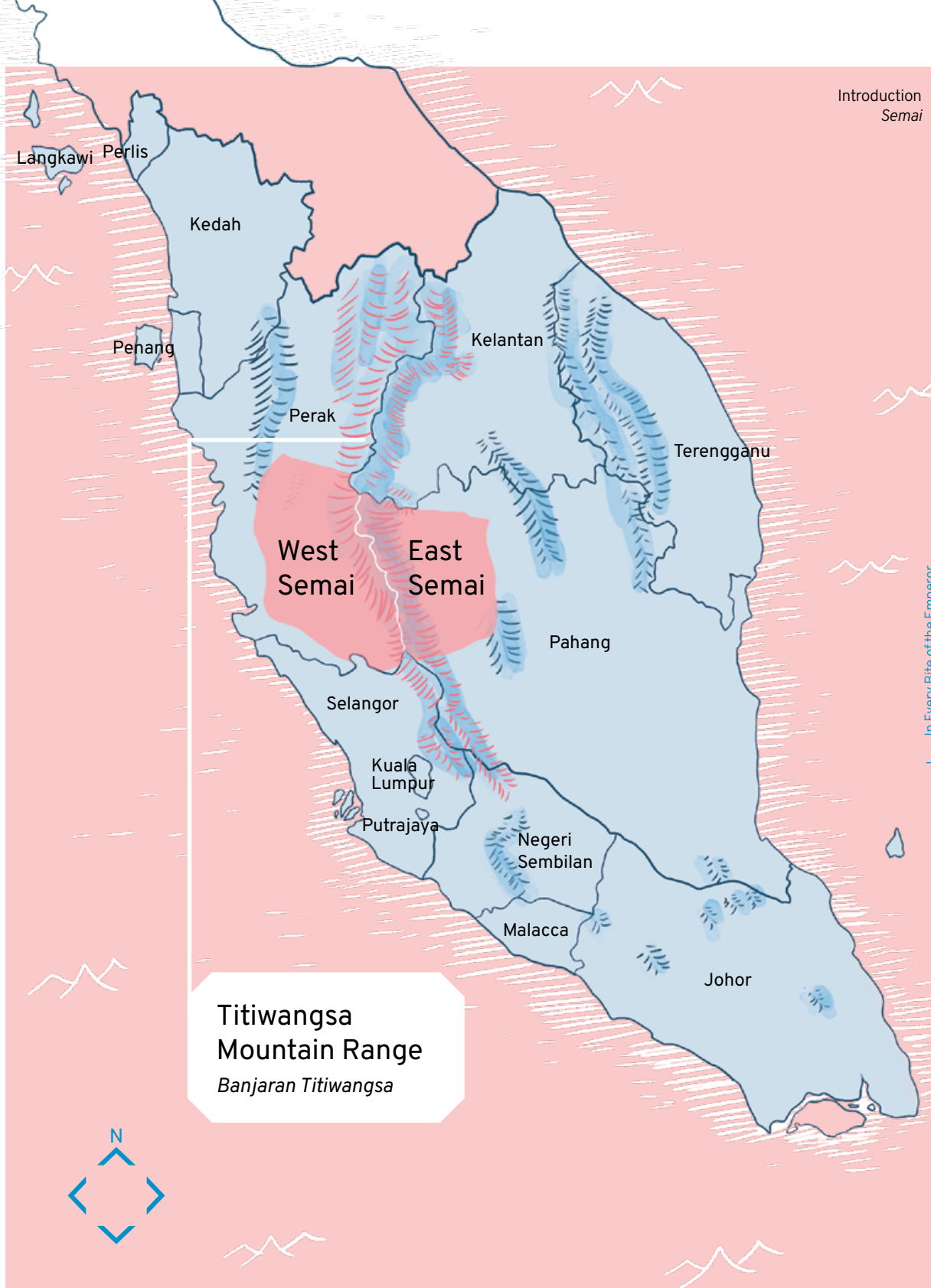
...making them the minority among dominant groups in Malaysia, facing increasing erasure of their history, identity, culture, language, and the biggest threat is the loss of their ancestral customary territories.

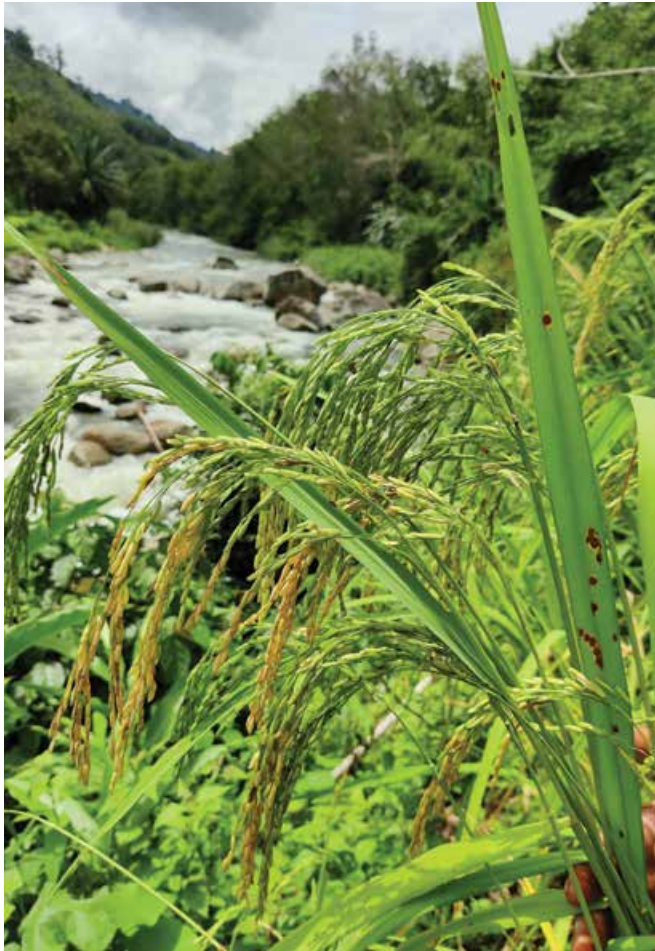


The Semai

are the largest Orang Asli group, spreading from the West to the East of the Titiwangsa Mountains or Main Range in the states of Perak and Pahang.







Traditionally semi-nomadic and today living in permanent settlements, the Semai still maintain their traditional activities such as hill paddy planting, hunting and gathering, fishing, and cultivating cassava, corn, and various vegetables in between hill paddy seasons.

In other words, they are expert swidden agriculturalists and herbalists.

The Semai are classified under the Senoi group, which is known for their dream practices.

This practice is the foundation of their cosmology – whereby the forest and the landscape they inhabit do not only comprise of themselves (humans) but also *ruai*, *mai serak*, and the various souls and spirits of the land (more-than-humans).

RUAI

Soul or spirit

MAI SERAK

People of the forest
or forest dwellers
(more-than-humans)



SENOI

Senoi is also spelled
as Sengoi and Sng'oi,
which means 'people'
or 'human'.



For them, there is no distinction between humans and the rest of the cosmos.

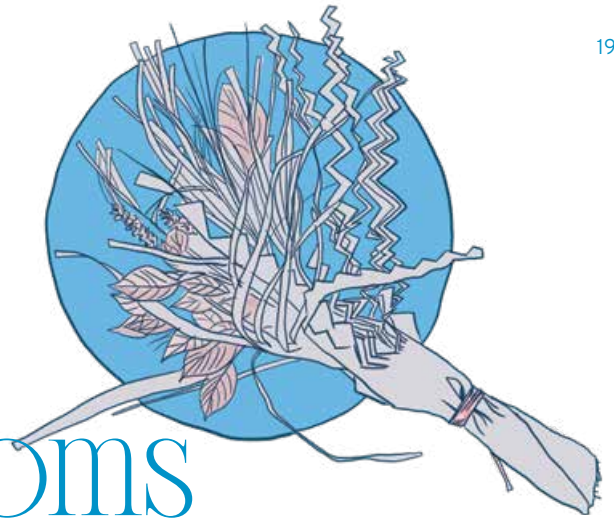
Humans and more-than-humans affect each other – an imbalance between the human and spirit worlds is reflected in illness and/or disasters.

In their daily lives, they observe *adat* through a set of ritualised actions as a way of maintaining this balance.

If the balance is broken, the *Tok Halak* would hold a shamanic ritual to restore the balance and health of the community and cosmos.

Therefore, the Semai recognise the role humans, more-than-humans, and shamans play in maintaining the wellbeing of the community and cosmos.





Adat = Customs

Tok Halak = Shaman

In our fieldwork, we looked at two landscapes –

West Semai in Perak <

History of extractive economy and
proximity to neighbouring Malays

> East Semai in Pahang

Stewardship by generations
of Semai custodians and their
area's natural inaccessibility

In Every Bite of the Emperor
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By placing the landscapes as dichotomies, centering on rivers and rituals...

We examined how generations-old institution, customs, and laws of the cosmos held by the Semai maintain stability of their place and how the disregard of it brought about destruction of a landscape and its long-lasting effects in the name of expansion.



Chapter 1

Rivers

by Wen Di Sia

"This world has many
realms. Every realm
has its laws."

West Semai, Perak

Sungai Kinta

Kinta River

The Kinta River forms the Kinta Valley, a valley that was rich in tin and its mines were among the most productive in the world.

Perak means silver in Malay, believed to be named after the silvery tin ore deposits found in great wealth on its land.



But before the massive mines and agriculture corrupted the landscape, the valley was once a pristine forest with large wildlife roaming its grounds and its rivers crystal clear and teeming with freshwater fishes.

The river was once the life-line of Kinta - providing a source of clean water, protein, and livelihood (fishing).

Today, a bird's eye view of the river from Ipoh to Tanjung Tualang reveals the ponds left behind by tin mining activities, framed by endless tracts of oil palm plantations, and the river water, brown.





When we drove across a bridge over Kinta River, on the way from Ipoh to the Tanjung Tualang Tin Dredge No. 5, we wondered... Why is the river so straight?

After centuries of mining and clearing of forest for agriculture, with miners diverting streams, eroding soils, and causing sedimentation downstream—the floods came, often and devastating.

In the 20th century, the Perak government and five mining companies formed an allegiance. Together, they would find a solution to the flooding in return the latter earned rights to mine more tin-bearing lands.

The river was reengineered, from a meandering course to a long, straight canal – deepened and widened where needed. The river was then used as a main waterway to ship the tin dredger.

Resulting in the landscape we see today.





The original people of Kinta are the Temiar to the north and the Semai to the south.

Today, there are still Semai living in Tanjung Tualang – surrounded by mining ponds and oil palm plantations.

Tanjung Tualang is said to be named after the Tualang tree that was once abundant in Kinta.

Once upon a time, it was a swamp forest – but in the eyes of European miners, swampy land is ideal for dredging.

By the mid-1920s, Tanjung Tualang had the largest dredging fields in Kinta Valley.

In the 1930s, the Semai who lived here worked for the dredging companies – but the regret and effects of the destruction to their environment are still felt until today.

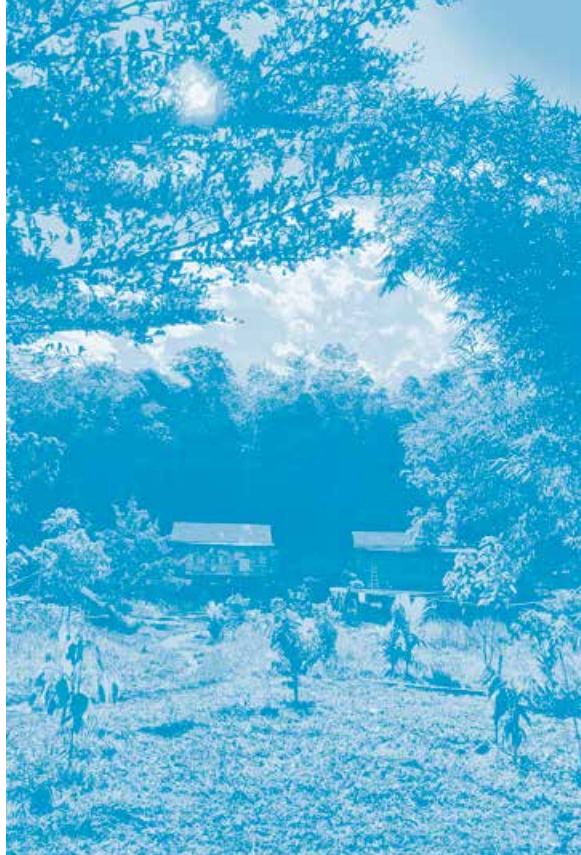
Loss of land, fishing grounds, and access to healthy forests.



East Semai, Pahang

Sungai Kenderong

Kenderong River



The Kenderong River is a tributary of the Jelai Kecil River which is in turn a tributary of Jelai River.

The Jelai River flows to a confluence with the Tembeling River, both the main tributaries of the longest river in Peninsular Malaysia, the Pahang River that eventually drains into the South China Sea.

The highlands of Pahang where the East Semai live have a naturally challenging terrain.

Due to this, their areas are mostly untouched, with crystal clear waters still flowing in the Kenderong and Jelai Kecil rivers.

With lesser contact to outside influences, the East Semai still maintain their traditional practices and values.

For the Semai of Kenderong River, the river is the source of life and their *adat*.

Along this river lies **sacred sites** looked after by *mai serak*. Permission must be granted by the *mai serak* through the *Tok Halak* in order to visit these places:



Hot spring and Waterfall

where water is taken from and used in their healing rituals

Telaga Tujuh,
translates to seven wells

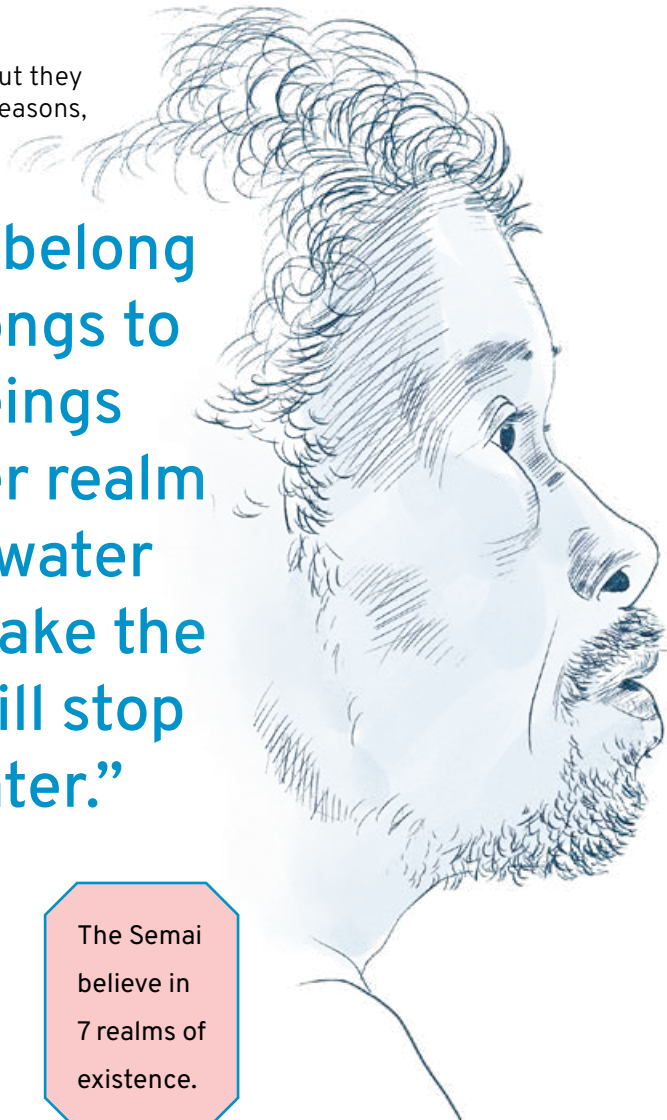
where they believe to be the source of all water

Gold exists along this river, but they do not mine the gold. Some reasons, quoted verbatim...

“It does not belong to us. It belongs to the other beings from another realm who supply water to us. If we take the gold, they will stop giving us water.”

The Semai believe in 7 realms of existence.

“We have no use for these rocks. It is not us who put a value on them.”







However, tranquillity does not last long in areas with natural resources.

An ongoing micro hydro project not only damaged several villagers' plantations, but would also encroach into their sacred site.

The shamans of the area had dreams of the *mai serak* that guards the hot spring.

In the dreams, it was communicated that the place must not be disturbed, or a disaster would strike them.

However, the authorities involved in this project do not recognise or respect the age-old institutions of *Halak* and *Adat*.

Spelling the potential loss of ritual grounds and clean water.



Chapter 2

Rituals

by Wen Di Sia

“Every plant, animal,
mountain, all living
and nonliving beings,
have a soul.”

Before we begin, we must first understand the two ritual expressions among the Semai.

Jenulak

The authentic, sing-dance-trance ritual.

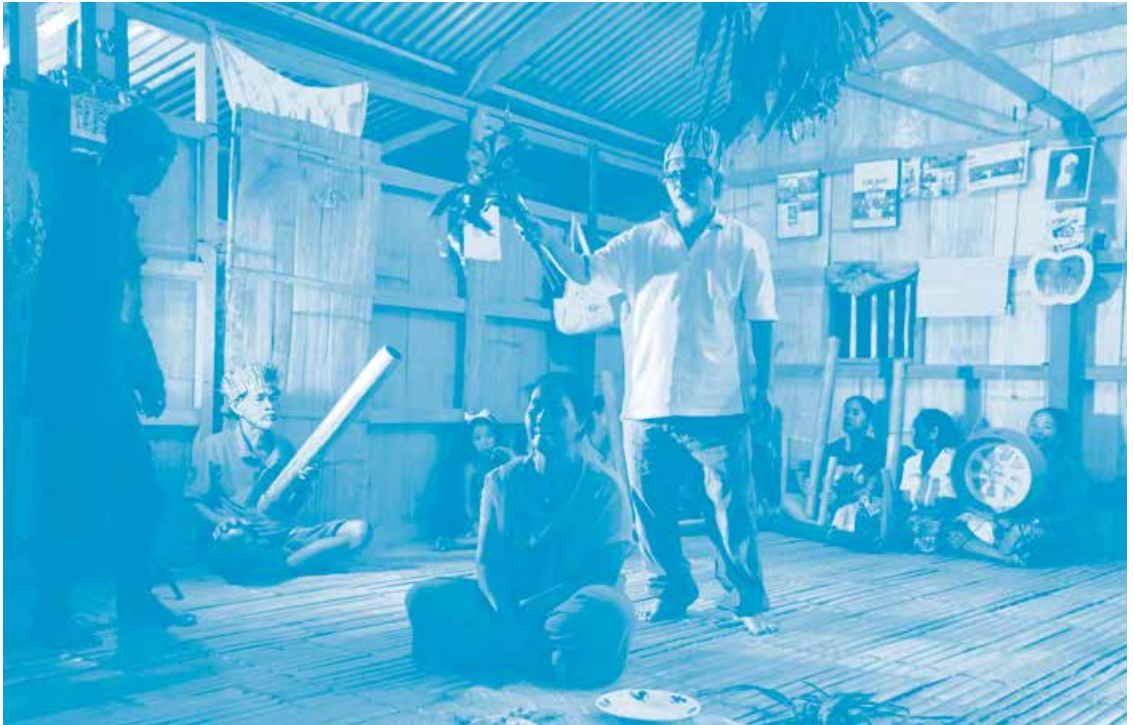
Genggulak

A localised jenulak, only present in West Semai.

Rituals are led by the *Tok Halak* or shaman who can communicate with more-than-human beings called *gunik*.

The songs and ritualistic actions needed for curing are taught or revealed to the shaman by the *gunik* through dreams.

Gunik = Spirit-guide



West Semai, Perak

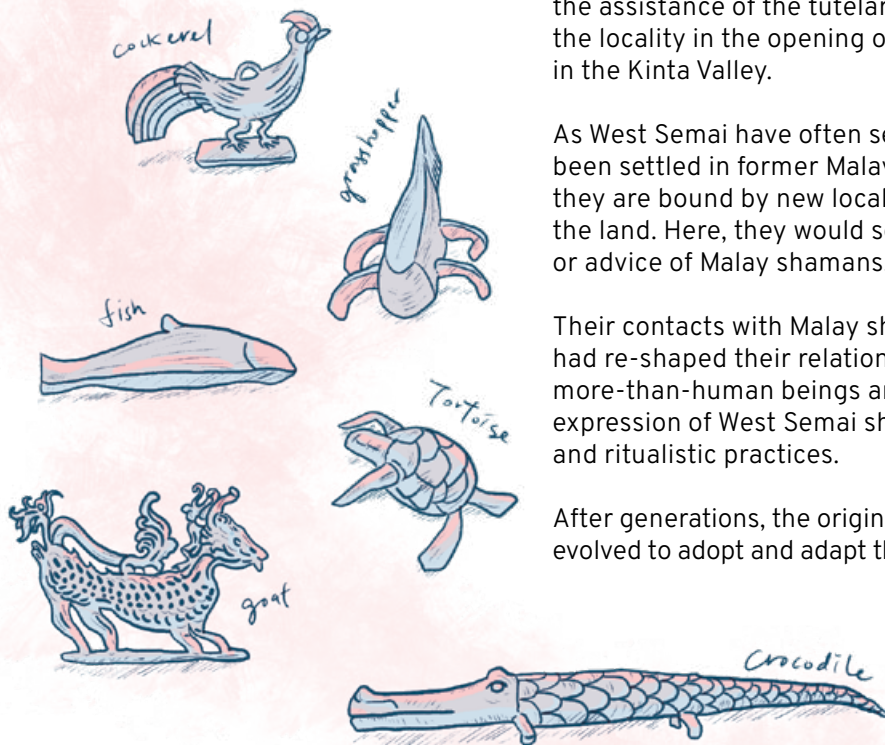
Genggulak is a derivation from an old Malay ritual called *genggulang*.

It was a ritual held by the Malay *pawang* or *bomoh* (shaman) when he needed the assistance of the tutelary spirit of the locality in the opening of a tin mine in the Kinta Valley.

As West Semai have often settled or been settled in former Malay areas, they are bound by new local spirits of the land. Here, they would seek the help or advice of Malay shamans.

Their contacts with Malay shamans had re-shaped their relationship with more-than-human beings and the expression of West Semai shamanism and ritualistic practices.

After generations, the original *jenulak* evolved to adopt and adapt the *genggulang*.



Animal-shaped tin ingots used by the pawang as sacrificial offerings to the spirits.

It should also be noted that even though the Orang Asli and Malays were the earliest miners in Kinta, followed by the Siamese and Mandailings, and then the Chinese...

...it was the Europeans with their capital and technology that accelerated tin mining and the degradation of the environment – and perhaps aided by their complete disregard of local beliefs and/or practices.

The spirit of the mine and mineral could still be bought over, controlled, and made to work for the Malay shaman.

Here, we see a dichotomy between the Semai and Malay shaman.



East Semai, Pahang

Julak (to sing) and *Jenulak* (the singing / song / chant) are central to the Semai life.

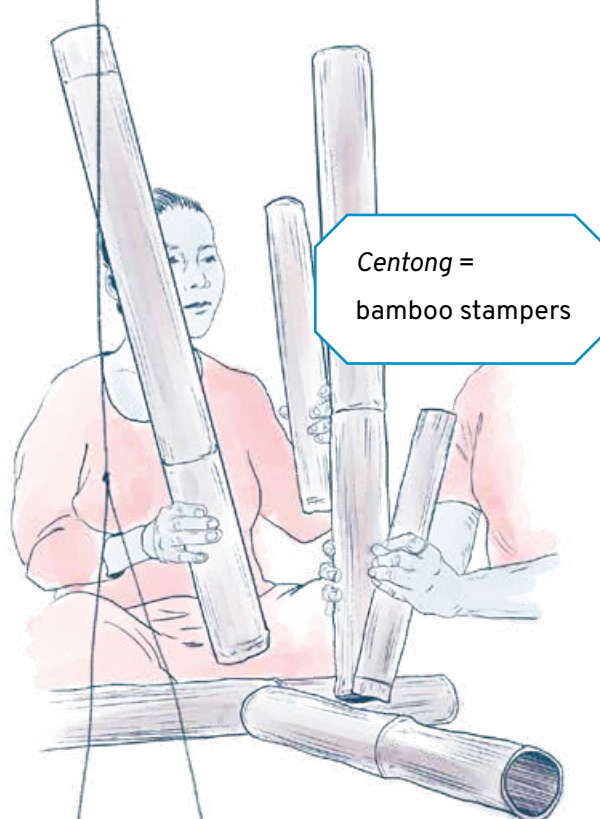
The song is the channel of communication between the *Tok Halak* and his *gunik*

where the *gunik* first reveals itself to its chosen person who will become a shaman, teaching him dream songs that will become their way of communication.

And the singing is how the shaman entices his *gunik* to enter the curative space

when he holds a healing ritual for a patient and the *gunik* would guide in the return of the patient's lost *ruai*.

Therefore, *jenulak* is the expression of the restoration and/or maintenance of balance of forces within the cosmos for the community's peace and health.



Centong =
bamboo stamper

There are two types of *jenulak*

Kebut is for curative purposes,
done in total darkness, for a patient.

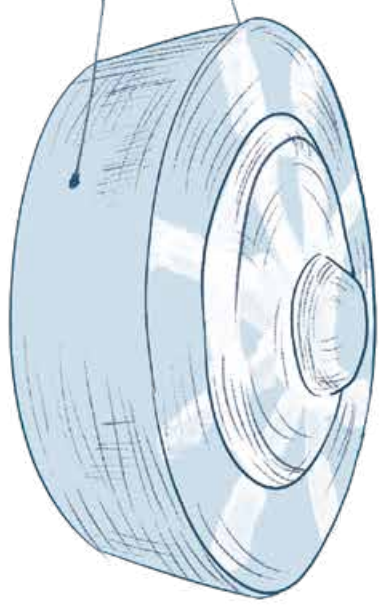
Gensak is for celebratory
occasions, especially done to celebrate
every hill paddy harvest season.

Both with the playing of *centong*,
tawak, and the singing of *jijoi*.

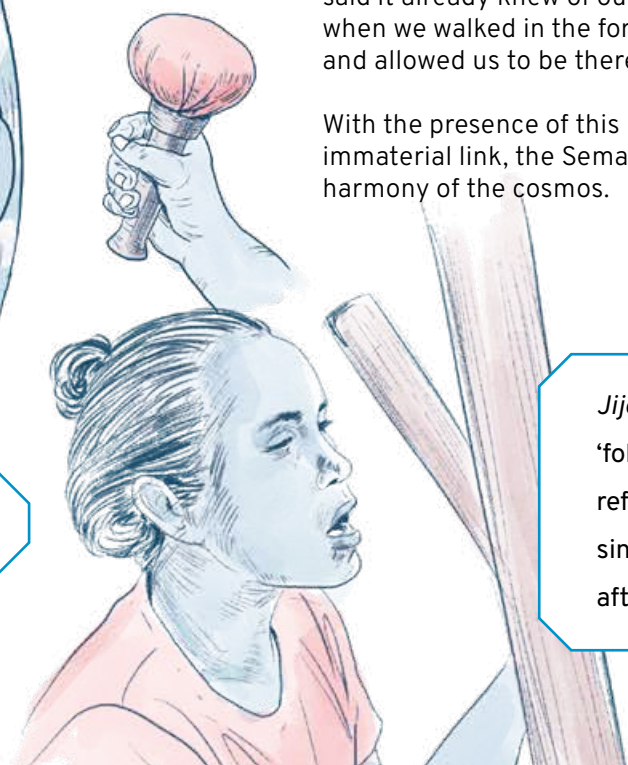
Whether curative or celebratory, there is
always an open channel of communication
between the more-than-human and the
human worlds, from the *gunik* via the
shaman or vice versa.

There was once the *Tok Halak* consulted his
gunik on whether outsiders are allowed to
be present in a *kebut* and the spirit-guide
said it already knew of our being there
when we walked in the forest, and it liked
and allowed us to be there.

With the presence of this material and
immaterial link, the Semai maintains the
harmony of the cosmos.



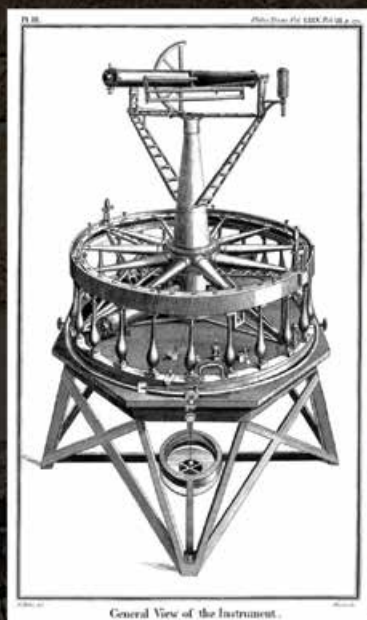
Tawak = gong



Jijoi = literally
'following' but also
refers to the female
singers who echo
after the *Tok Halak*

Total Station

We have no intention to draw conclusions from this collaborative research. Conclusions, solutions to move forward. What colonial extractive research usually does. Rather than progressing, it aims to provoke a pause, just like the grieving land in Colliers Moss. So we are ending here with storytelling instead. A story about an elephant named Larut. Being woven with research discoveries, conversations with indigenous elders and speculative narratives, this story is still crude. Refining the story is proposed as a collective responsibility here so that you also become part of it.



Here how the story goes:

A theodolite is a precision optical apparatus for measuring the angles and distances between designated points. As a primary tool for land surveying, it is extensively used for mining and engineering construction. The readings of this machine dictate the plan of land use and the position of buildings and infrastructure. A modern theodolite measures electronically and its measurements are stored directly in computer memory.

It's called a total station.

Angle measurement ✓
 Distance measurement ✓
 Coordinate measurement ✓
 Data processing ✓
 The land. Geometrics ✓

Meter squares. Hectares. Acres.
 Only the numbers are approvable stories.
 Fragmentation ✓
 Ownership ✓
 Extraction ✓

Total station.

The *Tok Halak*, a village shaman of an indigenous community in the Malaysian rainforest, is asking me, “Throw the black stone into the fire.” He insists, “Let’s see the smoke first.” I brought this stone from the land that refuses to revive. Nothing can grow there despite the persistent nurturing attempt of the silver birch trees and moss communities around. This land used to be a clay pit, then the dumping ground of coal mining spoils for decades, and more recently, the backyard of glass manufacturing.

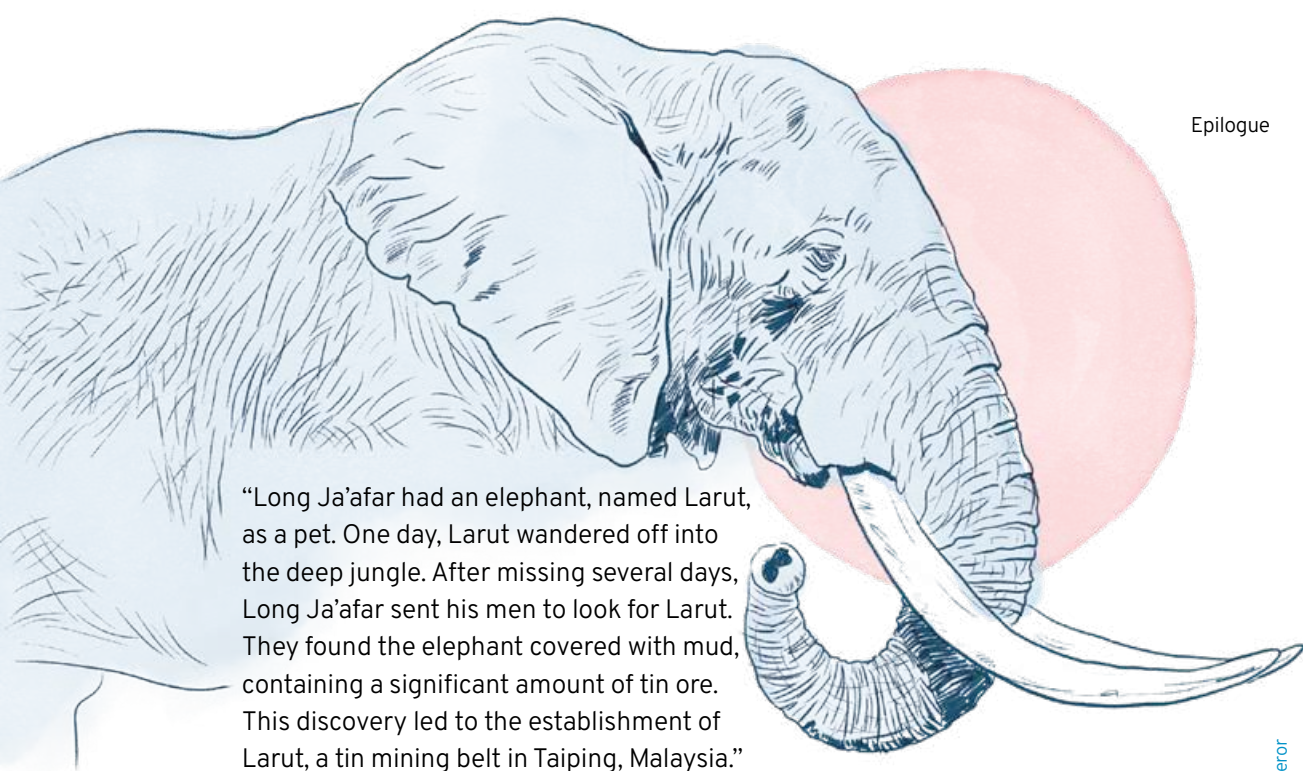
I imagine this land as my body. I feel its resistance against recovery from the abyssal layers of toxic sedimentation. It is still grieving from the underpaid trauma. The soil is mourning. Tears form into a solid black stone.

After explaining to the *Tok Halak* and elders what happened to this land, I carefully seek for advice if the spirit-guide would show the pathway to healing if I bring up this stone during the healing ritual of the Semai tribe. The *Tok Halak* replies, “You see, no smoke. All the spirits moved away from this land. It’s not possible to bring them back for a very long time. Also, the land wants to be the reminder of all the loss.”

One of the elders quietly adds, “Every inch square of soil has a unique spirit. The land you’re talking about seems to embrace none.”

The silence around the fire. My heart is sinking deep and dark, thinking of countless spirits displaced from the land. A theodolite would never be able to measure this loss. Its coordinate numbers make up only a half story if it could be a story at all.

The stone is still in the fire, not responding, looking stern and determined.



“Long Ja’afar had an elephant, named Larut, as a pet. One day, Larut wandered off into the deep jungle. After missing several days, Long Ja’afar sent his men to look for Larut. They found the elephant covered with mud, containing a significant amount of tin ore. This discovery led to the establishment of Larut, a tin mining belt in Taiping, Malaysia.”

This is the story that would greet you at the beginning if you visit the Tin Mining Museum in Perak. However, my suspicion brewed a different story. It’s a bit longer than the one in the museum.

Long Ja’afar used to tell Larut how his mother abandoned him and ran away, how he rescued a vulnerable baby elephant from starvation and harsh wilderness, giving him a name. One day, Larut dreamed of his mother, standing in dead silence, crying heavy. The dream was so vivid Larut took it as a calling. He decided to venture out to find the truth.

But the jungle Larut remembered was no longer present. Every direction and every path of the rainforest was laid with palm oil plantations. Endless, endless, endless rows of the same trees, planted on the same day to be slaughtered on the same day. Not many signs of other lives including Larut’s tribe. After days and days of searching, Larut reached the most beautiful mud field he’s ever seen. It was shimmering with a silvery texture. Straightaway, he jumped in. So much joy to forget all other worries for a moment. But, somehow, Larut started feeling disoriented and suddenly fainted.

When Larut opened up his eyes, he found himself back in captivity. And people around him looked so excited and buzzy. They were talking about numbers, big numbers. Larut knew what these big numbers really meant to the land and its communities. It means no home, no life, refugees, orphans, blood and tears. The foreseeable horror unsettled his stomach. Larut started crying, crying heavily just like his mother in the dream.

Following monoculture plantations, mining is the second largest cause of deforestation in Malaysia. It threatens 78% of species inhabiting only the rainforest and Orang Asli people, the indigenous communities. Tin deposits spread across western Peninsular Malaysia, particularly the Kinta Valley in Perak. In 1883, under British colonial rule, Malaysia was the largest tin producer in the world. In the 1920s, dredging machines were introduced to scale up tin production. They were built in the UK for the Malayan Tin companies with heavy holdings of foreign investment. It is a machine for mass destruction that leaves a biophysical environment permanently damaged.

Today, there is only one remaining tin dredge in Malaysia, Tanjung Tualang Tin Dredge No.5, aka TT5. It continued its operation for 44 years until August 1982. It is now fully open for visitors to experience the TT5 Guided Dredge Tour. TT5 has been proclaimed as part of the Kinta Valley National Geopark since October 2018, a 'must visit' heritage site by Trip Advisor. What brilliant capitalist magic of transforming this destructive machine into a friendly tourist site!

Have you ever looked at the map of Kinta Valley? It has hundreds of lakes around the Kinta River. They didn't arrive by geological time. They are man-made lakes - the consequential geography of violent tin dredging. The topography of Kinta Valley is made of Larut's tears. And this deeply touching presence of grieving geography trickles down to every tin of preserved food, especially the ones served as army rations in war times, and every semiconductor circuit board in our computers. However, the real magic is happening here.

Magnificent solitary storks, chatty swallows and sweet wrens are gathering together, witnessing and healing through Larut's tears. The broken land embraces all of them with gratitude.

In December 2022, the Malaysian newspaper, The Star reported the death of an indigenous woman. The report says she was trampled by 'wild elephants' who attacked the house of nine residents. All managed to escape except the mother who was found dead near the banana trees. I am thinking... It must be Larut. He wants his mother back. He terribly misses his forest.

Bah Cip, the shaman in another village, is assorting his craftworks for selling. One of them is the wooden elephant sculpture. He mentions the tragedy of the mother of five children who died from the elephant attack. He also adds this is because of the relentless timber logging that has been getting intense in the area. Hundreds of years old trees are falling down by electric chainsaws, and the excessive amount of logging residue blocks the river. Bah Cip worries about elephants going hungry and thirsty. No sign of a revenge plan for the loss of their own.

The increasing conflict between humans and elephants is a national concern in Malaysia, with an estimated RM30 million worth of damage over the six years period between 2015 and 2020. Various measures have been implemented, such as electric fencing to prevent trespassing on plantations. So far, the most effective method seems to be wildlife corridors that provide food sources to elephants. Malaysian Palm Oil Green Conservation Foundation (MPOGCF) is incorporating a Napier Grass (aka elephant grass) cultivation project in the wildlife corridor so that the elephants have food to eat and need not wander into plantations. They say it's the act of harmony that encourages humans and elephants to coexist. As part of the project, they will also fix satellite collars on several elephants to study their common routes before the green corridor is created.



Figure 2.7: Elephant satellite collar currently used by PERHILITAN

How much would you pay for consuming Larut's orphanage trauma? It turns out quite affordable. RM10 for an adult. RM5 for a child. About £2 for a full price.

stressful for the elephants. Also, the handler needs to control the elephant by forcing it to stand still or lie down, not giving any freedom for the elephant to play."

Referring to Trip Advisor, "You will never forget the day you helped give an elephant a bath. Get up close and personal with the amazing semi-wild elephants at Kuala Gandah Elephant Orphanage Sanctuary. Be sure to book in advance because the centre has strict daily visitor quotas."

However, Tree Tops Elephant Reserve in Phuket, Thailand informs cautiously: "In the wild, elephants love to bathe in rivers, ponds, streams and muddy wallows. They need space to splash, roll around, submerge, and cover themselves in mud. Elephants like peace and quiet, not loud groups of visitors throwing mud or buckets of water at them. If people are crowding around them, it is very

Semai healing ritual starts after sunset but the elders are getting ready in the morning for climbing up the mountain to collect sacred leaves and flowers. Along the way, the elders point out all the significant medicinal plants for different pains, including dark red-brown waxy-skinned *betis kak* mushrooms for crying children. The stalk of the mushroom is cut into seven pieces and threaded into a necklace for the children who don't stop crying. One of the elders picks one beautiful *betis kak* and quietly hands it down to me. Does he notice I am still crying every night?

Sun goes down. Villagers gather in the ceremonial house. *Balei Pancur*, the plants' totem offering for the spirit guide is hung up and beaming with heavenly floral scents. The *Tok Halak* starts singing and calling for a spirit guide. Midwife hits the gong and mothers beat the bamboo tubes to join the song. Eventually, everyone gets up to dance. Our bodies are swaying like tall steady elephant grasses. I see the mother of five children appear right next to Larut. She is gently wiping Larut's tears with forgiveness. They are also swaying to the healing sound.

The boundaries between different spirits are collapsing, all merging and dancing to the pulse of the rainforest. This swaying is our acute witness, our joyous prayer.



The immortal bodies, built in concrete, painted in the Lego blocks colour scheme, once all perfectly measured, categorised, un-named, un-rooted, separated from motherland and mothers. The debris of the colonial abuse remarks the signs of disorder and malfunction. Hands cut off. Skin peeled off. Cracks all over.

But wait. The mighty fern spores have landed in a wound. They are telling, the only beginning lies in the absolute ending. Persistently returning, the ongoing prophet of our broken world. Ferns are casting an ancient old spell.

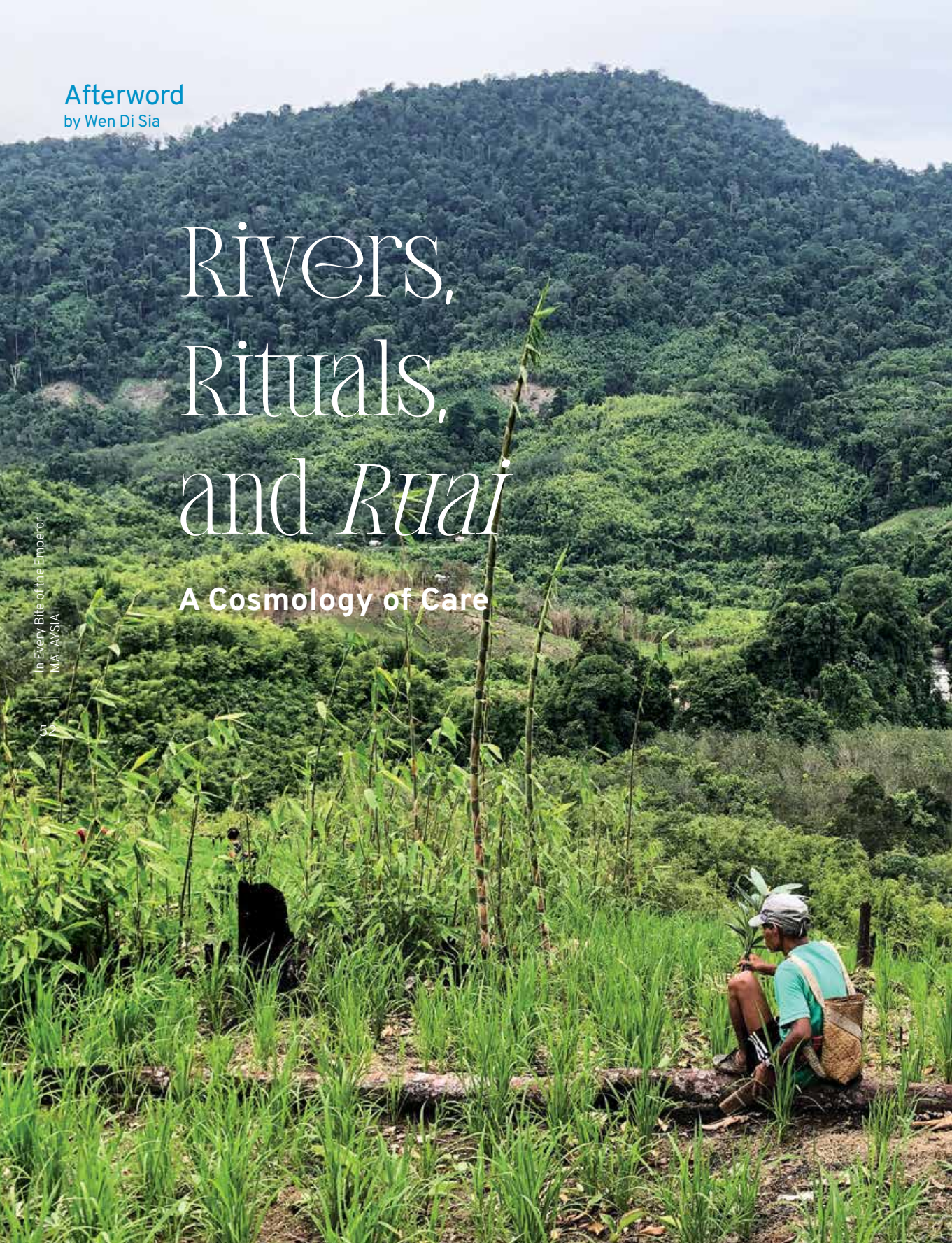
They are taking down a Total Station.

Afterword
by Wen Di Sia

Rivers, Rituals, and *Ruai*

A Cosmology of Care

In Every Bite of the Emperor
MALAYSIA





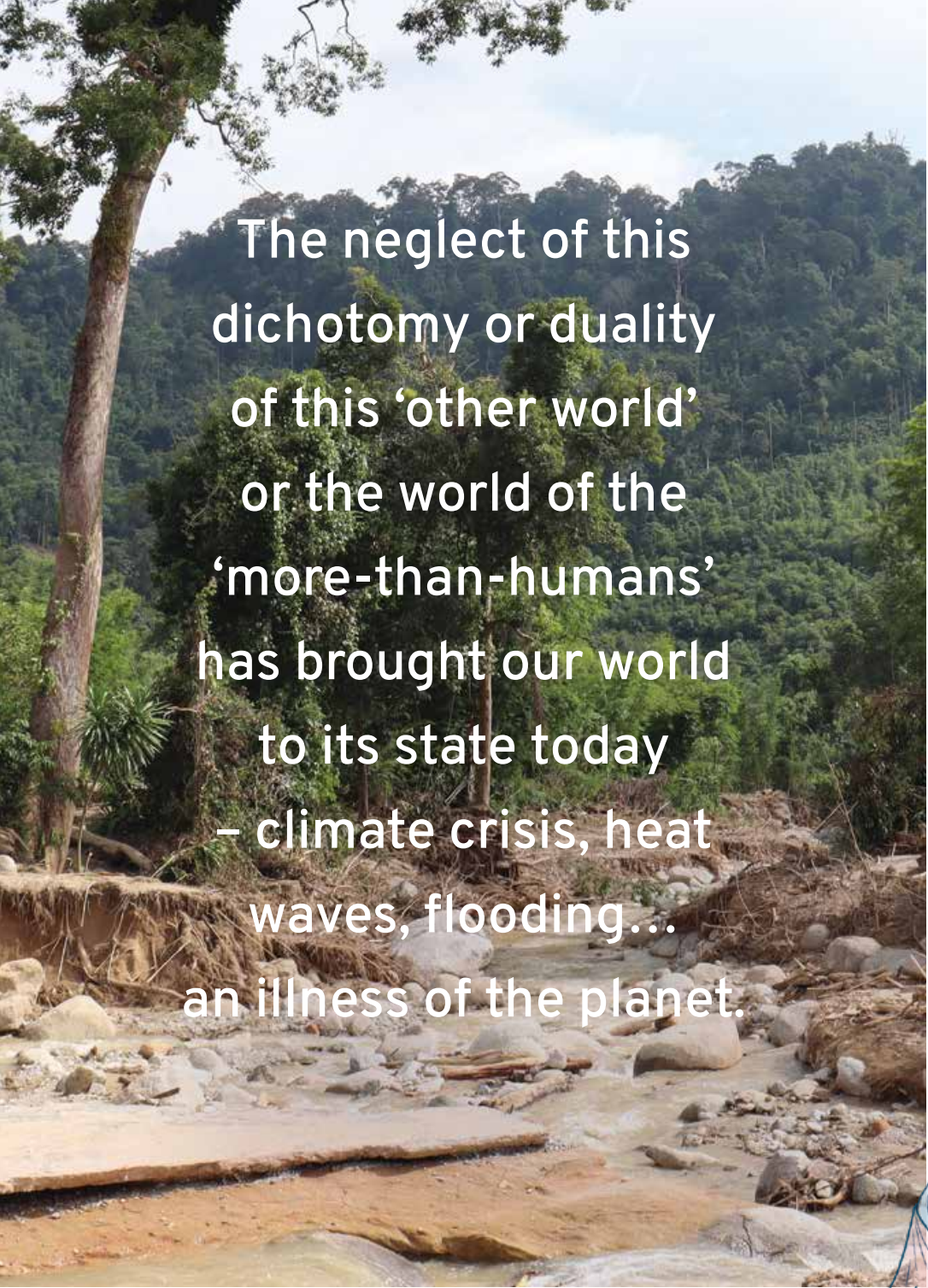
For generations, the Semai maintain the health of their place, not only for themselves but also for the wellbeing of every cosmic force in their universe.

This has resulted in the stability of their lived environment...

As compared to the expansion of tin mining enterprises in pursuit of capitalistic wealth, which sacrificed much of the natural spaces.

“No amount of money will equal the wealth given by nature.”

— one of the shamans of
Lenjang area in Pahang



The neglect of this
dichotomy or duality
of this ‘other world’
or the world of the
‘more-than-humans’
has brought our world
to its state today
– climate crisis, heat
waves, flooding...
an illness of the planet.



But within this lies the
solution to the crisis
humankind faces today:
to start listening to
our indigenous people
and returning to the
ancestral ways of
caring for the earth.



Acknowledgement

by Emily Gee

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