*ARIEL* Special Issue

“Literature & Postcolonial Capitalism”

January 29, 2018

*Highland Tales in the Heart of Borneo:* At the Intersection of Survivance,

Postcolonial Capitalism, & Multiculturalism

**Introduction**

Rich color photos, community narratives, and Indigenous histories populate the pages of *Highland Tales in the Heart of Borneo* (2015), a dual-language (English and Malay) book published by The Alliance of the Indigenous Peoples of the Island of Borneo (FORMADAT[[1]](#footnote-1)). FORMADAT is a transnational grassroots organization representing the Lundayeh, Kelabit, Lun Bawang, and Sa’ban communities of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia, as well as those of North Kalimantan in Indonesia.[[2]](#footnote-2) *Highland Tales* documents the cultural and geographic narratives of these Orang Asal[[3]](#footnote-3) lands and communities, drawing on the knowledge of village elders across the island of Borneo, which is divided between Malaysia and Indonesia. I have chosen to focus on *Highland Tales* for this special issue’s examination of literature and postcolonial capitalism for a number of reasons. First, it is part of an emerging body of cultural texts by Indigenous authors in Malaysia, particularly those based in East Malaysia. These include, for example, fantasy novels by Golda Mowe (Iban and Melanau) that draw on Iban legends, and children’s art books by Jainal Amambing (Rungus) that illustrate village life in Borneo. On Peninsular Malaysia, the Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC) has published children’s books, a small selection of folklore, a Malay-language novel, and a variety of academic reports, all focusing on the Orang Asli, the Indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. Beyond literary texts, exciting work is taking place in art, fashion, film, and mixed media, led by Indigenous artists and/or focusing on Orang Asal cultures.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Second, as part of this emerging body of work on and by Indigenous peoples in Malaysia, *Highland Tales* is unique in that it is a collection of oral histories and mythologies collected collaboratively from *multiple* Indigenous community members and leaders. In that regard, *Highland Tales* documents a variety of Indigenous voices sharing both connected and distinct narratives. The text is also unique in that its contributors span almost half a dozen Indigenous communities across two different countries. In addition, its publication was made possible through state agencies rather than independent or allied publishers (as is the case with Mowe, Amimbang, and the texts published through COAC). Thus, *Highland Tales* represents a multiplicity of voices, geographies, narratives, and stakeholders, making it an especially generative text through which to engage the question of literature and postcolonial capitalism.

While it is, in many ways, an ethnographic text, *Highland Tales* is also positioned as a literary text. Its title marks the text as a collection of *tales* tied to the Highlands of Borneo, specifically mythologies, cultural histories, and land narratives. *Highland Tales* has also been marketed explicitly as a collection of *stories*, as evidenced by the event at Silverfish Books promoting the book’s publication. Posters for the event, which took place at this independent bookstore in Kuala Lumpur on April 9, 2016, advertised it as an evening of “story telling” featuring “tales . . . narrated by our Kelabin, Lun Bawang, and Lundayeh guests” (Silverfish Books). In keeping with this framing of the text, I read *Highland Tales* with a focus on its literary qualities, particularly selected oral histories which, collected, transcribed, and translated, have been structured as stories that illuminate Indigenous beliefs and traditions.

Given the intersecting forces that shape both the form and publication of *Highland Tales*, I would like to propose two interconnected readings of this text: first, as an Indigenous critique of state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism and second, as a form of capitalist survivance that employs the very systems that exploit Indigenous peoples to advance its critique. In both these readings, it’s productive to recognize that this collaborative Orang Asal projectis a unique example of what Gerald Vizenor would term “survivance” – Indigenous “stories that mediate and undermine the literature of dominance” (*Manifest Manners* 12). In a Native American context, survivance asserts “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion” (Vizenor, “Aesthetics” 1) In an Orang Asal context, survivance – as illustrated by *Highland Tales* – operates as a critique of the systemic exploitation facilitated by state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism. The narratives collected in this text demonstrate Orang Asal claims to ancestral lands and preserve their cultural histories, despite efforts by state polices to coopt Indigenous culture, lands and resources. More specifically, *Highland Tales* portrays Orang Asal survivance as both trans-Indigenous[[5]](#footnote-5) and transnational. I use these terms together to signal that the text documents stories, histories, and land narratives that span multiple Indigenous communities (the Kelabit, Lun Bawang, and Lundayeh people) and both Indonesian and Malaysian territories. In so doing, *Highland Tales* asserts the presence of Indigenous peoples across Malaysia and Indonesia, illuminating borders that are structured not solely according to state lines, but also in relation to Indigenous understandings of land, culture, and community. The second thread of my argument will demonstrate that for the Orang Asal, *Highland Tales* functions specifically as a *capitalist* form of survivance. Marketed as a tool for ecotourism initiatives and published with the support of the Sarawak Forest Department, the Ministry of Tourism Sarawak, and the World Wildlife Fund Malaysia, *Highland Tales* demonstrates how Orang Asal survivance is necessarily mired in the very systems that exploit Indigenous communities. My reading of *Highland Tales* suggests that state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism are intertwined forces that Orang Asal communities are both working against and collaborating with in order to preserve and transform Indigenous cultures and histories.

In order to demonstrate the first strand of my argument – that *Highland Tales* operates as an Indigenous critique of state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism – I will illustrate how the Malaysian government works to erase Indigenous histories, commodify Indigenous culture, and exploit Indigenous lands and resources for national development projects. These efforts work in tandem with the state’s strategic marketing of itself as an exemplary Asian nation. Through national campaigns like Prime Minister Najib Razak’s “1Malaysia” platform and the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” tourism campaign, and through state laws and development policies, the government projects Malaysia as a uniquely diverse yet harmonious country. This narrative, which I term exceptional multiculturalism, asserts that Malaysia is a country ripe for tourism and global investment and, as such, is close to attaining first world nation status. I use “exceptional” here to signal the state’s view of itself as the epitome of Asian multiculturalism. Both the 1Malaysia and Malaysia, Truly Asia campaigns imagine Malaysia as an idyllic multicultural nation; a postcolonial country in which racial harmony is bolstered by rapid development. Postcolonial capitalism in Malaysia is thus structured according to a narrative of multiculturalism and modernization which, as I will illustrate, relies on the exploitation of Indigenous peoples, lands, and resources. *Highland Tales* disrupts this narrative by challenging the multicultural framing of the nation, privileging, instead, Indigenous stories and Indigenous land rights which predate the Malaysian state and which persist despite the efforts of postcolonial capitalism and state multiculturalism.

My discussion of postcolonial capitalism in relation to the Orang Asal focuses on what Kalyan Sanyal describes as “the politics of exclusion” (255). In *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-colonial Capitalism* (2007), Sanyal argues that a reconceptualization of postcolonial capitalism in term of “the politics of exclusion” directs attention towards “the space of the marginal and the dispossessed” in order to “politicize development” (Sanyal 255). Sanyal goes on to explain that this politicization is necessary given that “developmental governmentality posits itself as ‘politically neutral’ practices, the purpose of which is to improve the conditions of the population groups with the help of rational calculations by experts and professionals. The politics of exclusion subjects the depoliticized face of governmentality to a political critique and seeks to posit the terrain of governmentality as a politically contested terrain” (255). Exceptional multiculturalism, as a tool of developmental governmentality, justifies the seizure of Indigenous lands for major development projects and the commodification of Indigenous cultures as crucial to national development. These efforts are framed as necessary steps on the path to achieving “first world” nation status, which I argue is the ultimate goal of exceptional multiculturalism. *Highland Tales* asserts Indigenous claims to the communities, resources, and histories that are coopted by developmental governmentality. The text illustrates the primacy of Indigenous land claims and celebrates Indigenous histories, while also situating these claims and histories in relation to multiple Indigenous communities across Malaysia and Indonesia.

In the second half of my argument, I will demonstrate how the text is mired in the very forms of postcolonial capitalism and state multiculturalism that it critiques, and that it strategically employs state resources in order to serve Indigenous interests. Through *Highland Tales*, FORMADAT has chosen to ally itself with the institutions that have, historically, participated in the exploitation of Indgienous lands, resources, and communities for national development projects and tourism initiatives – the Sarawak Forest Department and the Ministry of Tourism Sarawak. In this case, however, FORMADAT’s collaboration with these state agencies illustrates how survivance in Malaysia necessitates the adoption of state resources and ecotourism as a method for preserving and celebrating the Indigenous cultures of Borneo. The text’s prefatory materials, featuring statements from representatives of these departments and ministries, as well as the context of the book’s launch at the 2015 Bario Food and Cultural Festival, frame the text as tool for commodifying Indigenous cultures and geographies in the service of national tourism. In actuality, state sponsorship has made possible the production of a complex text that collects and transforms the voices and experiences of distinct Indigenous communities in Malaysia and Indonesia. In this case, postcolonial capitalism actually enables Orang Asal survivance and self-representation, even as the text also functions as a tool of developmental governmentality. As Robert Young explains, “capitalism has apparently even managed to commodify resistance to itself to the extent that it also organizes and increases the production of that resistance” (*Postcolonialism,* 137). The publication and circulation of *Highland Tales* is an important example of this process, as it both amplifies Indigenous voices and histories in Malaysia, demonstrates how the Orang Asal are strategically employing the tools of postcolonial capitalism to advance their own interests.

Both strands of my argument are informed by the work of Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor. Vizenor first articulated his theory of “survivance” in *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994), and then revised and expanded the concept in the edited anthology, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (2008). He explains that survivance is “related to the word survival” and reflects “a quality of action, as in *survivance, relevance, assistance* . . . Survivance then, is the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb *survive,* ‘to remain alive or in existence,’ to outlive, [and] persevere (“Aesthetics” 19). This is a rich and productive term for my discussion of *Highland Tales* as it is a foundational concept in Native Studies which directs attention to Indigenous mediation, resistance to domination, and transformation. The term conceives of Indigenous presence in ways that exceed mere reaction or resistance.

However, my reading of *Highland Tales* aims to illustrate that in Malaysia, survivance is entwined with state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism. In order to assert the presence, history, and vibrancy of Orang Asal communities, FORMADAT strategically allies itself with the very forces it critiques. In other words, it adopts and transforms exceptional multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism in the service of survivance. In *Asia as Method* (2010) Kuan-Hsing Chen argues that “the potential of Asia as method is this: using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s point of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives” (212). In this article, I draw on a key theory of Native Studies in order to demonstrate that Malaysia becomes a unique site – an “anchoring point” – from which to theorize survivance in relation to the specific histories and contexts of the Orang Asal, and in conjunction with state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism.

**Multiculturalism in a Malaysian Context**

Before I turn to the text itself, it would be useful to contextualize my engagement with multiculturalism, both locally and globally. In recent decades, state multiculturalism has been at the forefront of Malaysia’s efforts to achieve international recognition: as an exemplary Asian nation, an aspiring “First World” nation, and a loyal Western ally. National tourism campaigns from the 1990s into the mid-21st century have capitalized on the slogan “Malaysia, Truly Asia,” suggesting that all Asian races enjoy full participation in this multicultural society. The state has amplified this message locally through the “1Malaysia” platform established by Najib in 2010. The rhetoric and policies of 1Malaysia assert that national “unity in diversity” is crucial to ensuring that the country attains “developed nation status” – which I argue is the ultimate goal of exceptional multiculturalism (Razak, “The Story of 1Malaysia” and “What a Remarkable Journey”). The desire here is to transcend the category of “Third World” nation and to garner international recognition as a “developed nation . . . a strong and stable country . . . [whose] people stand united” (Razak, The 1Malaysia Concept). The state imagines itself, then, as the “exceptional” postcolonial nation – the harmonious multicultural nation that secures both racial harmony and economic parity with “First World” nations.

Of course, the history of Malaysian multiculturalism can be traced back much farther to British colonial rule. In their overview of this history, Daniel Goh and Philip Holden note that,

when the British penetrated into the Malays states from the 1870s onwards . . . racializations were articulated in the political economy of the division of labour. Thus Chinese were placed as commercial middlemen aliens, Malays and Indonesian migrants confined to the fields as indigenous peasant smallholders, and the Indians imported as municipal and plantation labourers. Racial governmentality thus extended into many areas of colonial rule. (4-5)

This racialized colonial structure was adopted and transformed by the Malay-dominated coalition government following independence from British rule in 1957. Over time, it was cemented into the conception of racial communities as intrinsically distinct and separate (Malay, Chinese, Indian and other, or MCIO), exacerbated by the race riots of 1969, and codified in the New Economic Policy of 1970.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This policy was instrumental in structuring racial divisions and conceptions of indigeneity within a multicultural framework.[[7]](#footnote-7) Through it, the state instituted a series of affirmative action policies that were aimed at improving the socio-political status of *bumiputeras*. Both the Malays and the Orang Asal are recognized by the Malaysian government under this category as the Indigenous “‘sons/daughters of the soil’” (Andaya and Andaya 282). As Goh and Holden point out, “the *ketuanan Melayu* ideology [advocating Malay supremacy] has survived to combine constructed indigeneity and political primacy in the figure of the *bumiputera* Malay” (8). The initiatives of the New Economic Policy were quickly corrupted, consolidating wealth and power among elite Malays, while ignoring the needs of less privileged Malays and of the Orang Asal. At its most fundamental level, *ketuanan Melayu* functions as a “social contract” that reinforces the right of Malays to position themselves as Indigenous rulers, entrenching “constructed indigeneity” in law and public policy. This contract was endorsed in 1957 by the Chinese and Indian political parties (MCA and MIC), as part of the negotiations for the country’s independence from Britain (Andaya and Andaya 282).

At its core, then, the history of Malaysian multiculturalism is one of economic, racial, and political control over diverse populations, which are themselves figured as inherently separate and distinct. Stuart Hall’s definitions of the terms “multicultural” and “multiculturalism” are especially useful and applicable here. He argues that

‘multi-cultural’ . . . describes the social characteristics and problems of governance posed by any society in which different cultural communities live together and attempt to build a common life while retaining something of their ‘original’ identity. By contrast, ‘multiculturalism’ is substantive. It references the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up. (209)

This is precisely the case in Malaysia. However, I would add that in this context, the emphasis is on masking the disjunction between the celebration of Malaysian plurality and the realities of state control over racial stratification.

Exceptional multiculturalism attempts to erase the fact that the state prioritizes the protection of Malay special rights through economic, educational, and religious policies that benefit this majority population while further marginalizing minority populations. These minority communities include not only the Orang Asal, but also Indian, Chinese, mixed-race, and immigrant communities.[[8]](#footnote-8) In particular, the relationship between the Orang Asal and the Malay majority is one that is intimately entwined in the “politicization of ethnic identities” (Andaya and Andaya 4). Leonard Andaya explains that “the [Malays] now regard the Orang Asli[[9]](#footnote-9) lifestyle as an impediment to the country’s economic and social development. The earlier more cordial relations between the two groups have been conveniently forgotten in the drive toward modernity” (234). Instead, the history of cooperative trade and political alliances between the Orang Asal and the Malays (prior to the 15th century) has been subsumed by Malay claims to indigeneity and politicians’ assertions of Malay supremacy.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The strategies of exceptional multiculturalism are both similar to and distinct from the multicultural policies of neighboring Singapore and Indonesia. In *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (2001), Robert W. Hefner suggests that there is a “fundamental contrast between Malaysia and Indonesia on the issue of postcolonialism pluralism” (27). Indonesia rejects the idea of “differentiating citizenship along ethnic lines,” choosing instead “policies that [are] officially inclusive and non-discriminatory” (Hefner 27). According to Hefner, ongoing political crises and a lack of “settled consensus among Indonesian elite on the terms for citizenship and constitutional governance” has meant that the “inclusive and egalitarian citizenship expressed in so much of Indonesia’s nationalist heritage has yet to be realized” (28).

In comparison to Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore touts what it views as “an ethnically invisible program of ‘shared values’” (Hefner 41). While the state rejects affirmative action policies tied to a particular ethnic group, and asserts that religious affiliations and practices should remain private, this program of shared values is, in actuality, a “selective reinterpretation of Confucian values in a manner that emphasizes loyalty to the state and capitalist self-discipline” (Hefner 41). At the same time, Singaporean rhetoric on multiculturalism also shares with Malaysia the language of exceptionalism and compartmentalized diversity. As Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam noted at a 2016 Chinese New Year Celebration, Singaporeans should avoid the “dilution” or “fusion” of cultural identities, and “should instead evolve, adapt and strengthen our own cultures, and take a keen interest in each other’s cultures. This will allow us to deepen our Singapore identity, and take real pride in multiculturalism in Singapore” (qtd. in Yong). Here, Shanmugaratnam places an emphasis on multiculturalism as a unique and valuable feature of Singaporean national identity, even as he implicitly stresses the need to maintain boundaries between distinct cultures.

The clearest point of contrast between Malaysian multiculturalism and that of Indonesia and Singapore is the *explicit* compartmentalization of diversity and difference that structures Malaysian society. Hefner describes this system as one of “asymmetrically differentiated citizenship, which accorded basic citizen rights to Chinese and Indians in exchange for special legal, political, and economic rights for Malays” – the “social contract” referred to earlier (29). However, while Hefner argues that this strategy has, ironically, enabled Malaysia to “slowly but surely . . . make progress in ethnic relations,” ongoing public protests and the rise of new opposition movements suggest the opposite (28).

Over the last decade, Malaysian and Indigenous civic engagement has taken on various forms, spurred by increasing disenchantment with government policies, systemic racial divisions, and the suppression of civil rights. This disillusionment has manifested itself through the radical increase in electoral participation, the formation of a new opposition coalition, massive public protests, and a rise in social justice movements. These efforts, including BERSIH,[[11]](#footnote-11) “Kita Lawan” (“We Will Fight”),[[12]](#footnote-12) “Negara-Ku” (“Our Country”),[[13]](#footnote-13) and GHAH,[[14]](#footnote-14) indicate that Malaysians are increasingly dissatisfied with the hypocrisy of state narratives that tout multiracial harmony. In the face of this frustration, Malaysians are articulating not only a deep disappointment in Malaysian national and cultural life, but also the hope for widespread reform through activism and ongoing political struggle.

These efforts by Malaysians run parallel to Orang Asal activist and community organizing initiatives including: the filing of numerous Indigenous land rights cases in an effort to protect Orang Asal lands and livelihoods; ongoing protests of hydroelectric dams, logging, and other large-scale development projects that displace Indigenous peoples; local and regional celebrations of the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples and Earth Day, advocacy workshops on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Indigenous community initiatives such as the development of the Cenwaey Penaney Community Learning Centre in Pahang. The activist and civic engagement efforts of the Orang Asal and of other Malaysian communities suggest that Malaysia is, in fact, experiencing the kind of “‘foundational’ crises” that Hefner attributes solely to Indonesia (28).

The rhetoric and policies of exceptional multiculturalism, therefore, are designed to obscure these realities, while simultaneously justifying narratives of modernization and progress. According to the 1Malaysia campaign, large-scale projects like massive highways and mega dams will improve Malaysians’ “quality of life” and earn the country its place among First World nations (Razak, “What a Remarkable Journey”). However, the cost of these national ambitions is disproportionately shouldered by the Orang Asal. As Sandra Khor Manickam notes, a “salient feature” of both the colonial British government in Malaya and the current Malaysian state is “the commitment to developing resources within the state’s boundaries – it is this feature that continues to have lasting effects on the lives of Orang Asli” (193). It is Indigenous lands, cultures, and communities that are considered dispensable for the purposes of growing energy output, sourcing natural resources, and expanding economic opportunities for state and corporate agencies. Exceptional multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism are thus linked in their joint exploitation of the Orang Asal.

In thinking about this relationship between multiculturalism, the state, and Indigenous peoples, Canada offers an interesting and productive point of comparison. Canada shares with Malaysia a history of British colonization, and both countries have embraced multiculturalism, albeit through slightly different mechanisms. In his discussion of the relationship between Canadian multiculturalism and First Nations peoples, Sam McKegney notes:

Canadian multiculturalism, which seeks to distinguish Canadian society from the supposed “melting pot” model of the United States through the celebration of cultural difference, has worked to efface the unique historical conditions of Indigenous nations as prior occupants of Turtle Island and to reimagine those *nations as cultures*, as particular shards within the Canadian mosaic. (411)

My assessment of exceptional multiculturalism’s effects on the Orang Asal share much with McKegney’s analysis of Canadian multiculturalism. For example, the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” tourism campaign depicts Indigenous peoples through vague markers of “native” attire, ritual, and performance. Indigenous peoples are presented in these ads as simply one of the many cultures that make Malaysia both exceptionally multicultural and exceptionally Asian. In this regard, not only are the Orang Asal subsumed within Malaysian nationalism (dominated by claims of Malay supremacy), they are also situated within the larger Asian region as one of a variety of Asian cultures. As with its counterpart in Canada, there is no impetus in Malaysian multiculturalism to present the Orang Asal as “prior occupants” of what are now the Malaysian peninsula and the island of Borneo.

While Malaysian state policies continue to define the differences between Malays and the Orang Asal*,* the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (passed in 1985), “sought to corrode political differentiation among cultural and ethnic groups in Canada” (McKegney 411). The goal of this piece of Canadian legislation was to make certain that “‘only the individual is the possessor of rights’” (Trudeau qtd. in McKegney 411). By contrast, Malaysian multiculturalism today, enacted through the 1Malaysia platform and made visible through the Malaysia, Truly Asia campaign, continues to reinforce divisions between ethnic communities. The emphasis here is on binding individuals to their respective racial groups and positioning the Orang Asal as simply one of many Malaysian communities.

Another important point of distinction between these two versions of multiculturalism is that while Canada celebrates the primacy of individual rights, Malaysia emphasizes the importance of communal efforts for the sake of national development. Canadian multiculturalism ensures that “Canadians are free to choose for themselves, without penalty, whether they want to identify with their specific group or not. Their individual rights are fully protected and they need not fear group pressures” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada). Malaysian multiculturalism focuses instead on how “Malaysians have remained unified as one, working towards shared goals: to improve our quality of life, and develop our nation (Razak, “What a Remarkable Journey”). Here, developmental governmentality and postcolonial capitalism rely on the language of communal struggle and unity. The campaign asserts that “Malaysia is on the brink of developed nation status. Committed as one, we can achieve this goal” (Razak, “What a Remarkable Journey”). Najib suggests that what is at stake in Malaysian multiculturalism is the national struggle for “First World” status. Thus, self-consciously exhibiting exceptionalmulticulturalism becomes the means of securing racial harmony and international recognition, while simultaneously inhibiting racial solidarity and eliding indigeneity.

In many respects, the Malaysian government’s exploitation of the Orang Asal displays the established practices by which nations – especially postcolonial nations – oppress and control Indigenous peoples. As Young argues, “settler liberation from colonial rule was premised on indigenous dispossession. The emancipatory narrative of postcolonialism was not accessible to those who remained invisible within it. Indeed for them, national emancipation produced a more overpowering form of colonial rule, often enforced by a special contract for indigenous peoples distinct from that between settlers and metropolis” (“Postcolonial Remains,” 25). In Malaysia, exceptional multiculturalism asserts that it is the combination of multicultural harmony and postcolonial capitalism – figured through major development projects – that will enable Malaysia to secure its place among “First World” nations. Indigenous peoples are the casualties of this form of developmental governmentality, which depends on the exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources, and the commodification of Indigenous cultural practices.

**Reading Orang Asal Survivance**

In order to understand the significance of *Highland Tales* as a form of Orang Asal survivance that critiques state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism, it is important to begin with FORMADAT’s mission. According to their website, the organization aims to “maintain and strengthen the cultural traditions, language, customs, and family bonds shared by all the Lundayeh, Lun Bawang, Kelabit and Sa’ban people in their common ancestral land of the Highlands of Borneo” (FORMADAT, “Vision”). In addition, FORMADAT “encourage[s] conservation and sustainable development for the Highlands” while “protect[ing] cultural and historical sites, and the collective intellectual property rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Highlands” (FORMADAT, “Vision”). FORMADAT, therefore, asserts the presence of Indigenous peoples in Borneo by laying claim to ancestral lands, asserting shared ties that link distinct Indigenous communities, and uniting Orang Asal peoples across borders that separate Malaysia and Indonesia. For the organization behind *Highland Tales*, the preservation of Indigenous communities in Borneo necessitates the protection of Indigenous cultural traditions, intellectual property, and ancestral lands.

These efforts directly contest the laws of East Malaysia which ensure that Indigenous land rights are tenuous, often dictated by the interest of the state, state-owned corporations, and private businesses. Kirk Endicott explains that

in Sabah, Native Customary Land refers to fifteen-acre allotments of land given to natives for individual tenure. The government charges holders a reduced annual payment on them. Natives can obtain more land, but they have to pay as much as anyone else. Sarawak has two categories of land associated with native groups. One is Native Area Land, where ‘only indigenes may exercise rights under title.’ The other is Native Customary Land, where land is untitled but held individually or communally by natives. State recognition of Native Customary Land does not mean that rights over that land are secure, however. In practice, state governments can extinguish those rights at will . . . For instance, politicians can convert Native Customary Land to Reserved Land, and grant logging concessions on it, merely by ‘gazetting’ the change. (“Indigenous Rights” 152)

In other words, the laws that structure land use and development in Malaysia ensure that Native land rights are easily overturned to facilitate state development projects and serve political interests. As Endicott points out, “both federal and state governments have become deeply involved in economic planning and even in owning business enterprises. Political parties, especially the dominant Malay party, UMNO, also own or partially own numerous businesses” (Endicott, “Indigenous Rights” 148).

For example, the office of the Chief Minister of Sarawak is notoriously corrupt and has reaped financial profits from development initiatives that exploit Indigenous peoples. Former Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud granted logging concessions to family members and friends for an area of land in East Malaysia that is almost equal to the size of Belgium (Bosshard). Companies owned by Taib supplied the materials for hydropower stations (also developed on Indigenous lands), and were responsible for building the resettlement camps to which displaced Indigenous peoples were sent. Recent estimates place the Taib family fortune at $15 billion – a fortune derived, at least in part, from these kinds of projects (Bosshard). Endicott explains that companies and state agencies specifically target Indigenous lands for logging and hydroelectric dam projects because they tend to be rich in raw materials. They are also cultivated by the Orang Asal using “non-intensive methods . . . giving the illusion that the land is underutilized” (Endicott, “Indigenous Rights” 150-151). The appearance of “underutilized” land offers additional justification, in the eyes of state and private agencies, of their right to seize and develop these areas (151).

These dynamics illustrate that exceptional multiculturalism works hand-in-hand with postcolonial capitalism to serve state and private interest and to facilitate large-scale development projects. The underlying logic of exceptional multiculturalism suggests that if the nation is happily multicultural, the state can commit to “improving” the lives of its citizens through projects such as hydroelectric dams and economic corridors. On the one hand, these initiatives serve as markers of Malaysia’s progress on the global stage – symbols of the country’s aspiration to take its place among other developed nations. On the other hand, these projects have been (and remain) the focal point of Indigenous struggles to protect their lands and livelihoods. Over the last few decades, the state has consistently worked to impede these activist efforts by passing laws that criminalize Indigenous protests and prevent news media from broadcasting Orang Asal activism. Exceptional multiculturalism, working in tandem with political and economic policies, erases the country’s Indigenous histories and ignores the urgent struggles of the Orang Asal to protect their lands, cultures, and communities.

In essence, then, Indigenous lands, cultures, and communities are considered dispensable for the purposes of growing energy output, sourcing natural resources, and expanding economic opportunities for state and corporate agencies. This violent disruption of Indigenous cultural and economic systems contributes to the impoverished living conditions that Indigenous communities currently face. Yet, as Colin Nicholas notes, it is not the case that the Orang Asal are “anti-development” (“The Orang Asli: First” 327). Instead, they have “persistently asked for development – but on their own terms” (Nicholas, “The Orang Asli: First” 327). FORMADAT’s mission, as well as the stories collected in *Highland Tales*, articulate a willingness on the part of the Orang Ulu to participate in ecotourism initiatives, while simultaneously asserting their right to protect Indigenous lands, cultures, and communities.

In this sense, FORMADAT and *Highland Tales* are engaged not only in the preservation of Indigenous lands and cultures, but also in efforts to increase the visibility of Indigenous geographies. Penghulu George Sigar Sultan, Chief of FORMADAT, explains that *Highland Tales* is the product of Orang Ulu “village elders and villagers who shared their knowledge of cultural and heritage sites and folklores” (Sultan qtd. in WWF Malaysia). The end result is a 78-page color text that records and preserves the significance of Indigenous lands, alongside the histories and mythologies of the Orang Asal. Visually, the text centers Indigenous lands and boundaries through a two-page spread featuring a color map of the island of Borneo. Unlike conventional maps that feature the cities, states, and regions that constitute Malaysian and Indonesian territory on Borneo, this map details the regions that are home to the Lundayeh, Lun Bawang, Kelabit, Sa’ban and Punan peoples. Concise notes on each district identify these Indigenous communities as the region’s “majority” populations, summarize their primary economic activities, and describe shared boundary lines. The map visually and linguistically asserts the presence and vitality of Orang Ulu communities in Borneo, despite state policies that displace Indigenous peoples and appropriate their lands and resources. The map also signals a reimagining of Borneo’s borders, situating them not in relation to the national boundaries that divide Malaysia and Indonesia, but in relation to “shared” boundaries between Indigenous communities.

This visual representation of Orang Ulu lands also critiques state representations of land – not only in the land rights laws discussed above, but also in state tourism campaigns. For example, the opening line from the “TM 2000” ad in the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” series asks, “If life is a series of black and white, shouldn’t your holiday be in color?” The commercial invites viewers to transport themselves from the black and white scenes of a crowded urban city, to the rich and colorful landscapes of rural Malaysia. The narration is timed to coincide with these contrasting scenes: still-shots of a non-descript, congested city are replaced by fast-paced aerial shots of a sunrise, breaking dramatically over lush greenery and crystal blue waters. Opening with the rhetorical question, “Shouldn’t your holiday be in color?” and switching dramatically from black and white images to color, “TM 2000” constructs rural Malaysian lands as inherently exotic and exciting. Color operates as a stimulating signifier in this transition, as the tourist is invited to explore verdant landscapes that appear entirely uninhabited; an enticing escape from the oppressive cityscapes of the opening frames.

By contrast, the map of Borneo that figures in the opening pages of *Highland Tales* asserts that these lands – in some of the most rural areas of Malaysia and Indonesia – are, in fact, inhabited. The visual boundary lines that delineate specific Lundayeh, Lun Bawang, Kelabit, Sa’aban and Punan territories assert the ancestral borders of Orang Asal communities. The brief commentaries on each population, their key economic activities, and the specific geographies of these areas of Borneo signal that these lands are not simply desirable tourist destinations, but are central to Indigenous lives and livelihoods. The logic of postcolonial capitalism – in this case, the marketing of Malaysian geographies in the service of the tourism economy – is brought into close proximity with both exceptional multiculturalism and Orang Asal survivance.

On the one hand, this map illustrates the presence and history of Indigenous peoples – a critique of the narrative of exceptional multiculturalism that frames these lands as empty, available, exotic, and desirable. On the other hand, *Highland Tales* is itself a tool of the latest iteration of this narrative – ecotourism. The book is, therefore, situated at the point where both survivance and postcolonial capitalism meet. Sultan himself describes these conflicting interests in his overview of the text: “This publication will serve as promotional material for ecotourism at natural and cultural sites of the Kelabit and Maligan highlands, [and as] a reference for nature guides to use and share with visitors and tourists” (qtd. in WWF Malaysia). Echoing this sentiment, the foreword to *Highland Tales* from Datu Ik Pahon Joyik, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Tourism Sarawak, emphasizes the books “utility” for tourism efforts. He states that the text “can be utilized as an ecotourism material for places of interest in the Kelabit and Maligan Highlands and a tool for nature guides to facilitate their work, if used wisely. Thus, this publication is in line with the Ministry’s efforts in promoting ecotourism, which is a growing niche market in Malaysia” (FORMADAT, *Highland Tales* iii). Subsequent maps throughout the book illustrate transportation options for visiting each of the Orang Ulu lands discussed in the text, with specific travel tips and important geographic markers.

Here, I would like to propose that Orang Asal survivance coopts the tools of postcolonial capitalism for its own purposes. FORMADAT has clearly made a choice to support Indigenous communities and economies by allying itself with state ecotourism. Both the opening map in *Highland Tales* and the travel maps that follow it facilitate this economic activity, while also asserting the presence and specificity of Indigenous cultures and histories. To return to Colin Nicholas’ argument referenced earlier, it is not the case in Malaysia that Indigenous peoples are “anti-development.” Instead, they choose to pursue development “on their own terms” (Nicholas, “The Orang Asli: First” 327). In this case, Orang Asal survivance is made possible by reframing aspects of postcolonial capitalism and exceptional multiculturalism. The mechanisms of state tourism campaigns, the logistics of travel and transportation, and the sponsorship of state institutions facilitate the visibility of Indigenous communities in Borneo, and of their histories and cultures.

Importantly, these geographic and cultural narratives are also presented as shared aspects of Indigenous communities across Malaysia and Indonesia. In this case, Orang Asal survivance is structured by both trans-Indigenous and transnational stories. Some of the most prominent mythologies featured in *Highland Tales* are described as cultural texts that connect distinct Orang Asal communities spanning Malaysian and Indonesian territories. Sultan, the FORMADAT Chief, describes these cultural networks as follows: “Each [community] has their own distinct dialects and cultural nuances yet rooted at the core with parallel mythology and oral history. We are the guardians of a rich array of tribal stories and legends” (qtd. in WWF Malaysia). A recurring legend throughout the text that exhibits these parallel qualities centers around the giant Upai Semaring. He is referenced in at least four different stories in the text, and each narrative makes a point of noting his relationship to multiple Orang Ulu communities and regions. In the first of these stories, entitled “The Legendary Giant,” Ricky Ganang (one of the book’s contributors) explains that the giant is “called Upai Semaring by the Lun Bawang” but “was known by the name of Agan Tadun to the Kelabits” (FORMADAT, *Highland Tales* xiii). Ganang goes on to describe Upai Semaring’s travels throughout the Highlands of Borneo, from “Long Bawan to Ba’ Kelalan, Bario [to] Long Pa’ Sia’” (xiii). The listing of these regions signals the giant’s presence in the regions of the Lundayeh, Lun Bawang, and Kelabit communities, reinforcing the story’s opening reference to the giant as a figure connected to multiple Orang Ulu peoples and districts.

Similarly, subsequent stories about Upai Semaring’s art, his sharpening stone and mortar, and his engravings all reference the giant’s links to distinct Indigenous communities and to his travels between them. For example, Kading Sultan of Long Langai explains in “The Art of Upai Semaring” that “close to the largest village of Buduk Nur is a set of four stones known as *batuh angan* . . . The story goes that these stones were used as an *angan* (a wood-fire stove) by the legendary giant Upai Semaring, who lived in the mythical days where the highland people were said to be physically huge. According to legends, he arrived in Ba’ Kelalan after leaving East Kalimantan” (FORMADAT, *Highland Tales* 9). On the following page, TK Dadius Tagko describes “the village of Long Lemutut” as “the place where Upai Semaring was said to have sharpened his giant knife and pounded paddy on giant stones” (FORMADAT, *Highland Tales* 11). Both these stories make note of Orang Ulu villages, regions, and waterways: “Buduk Nur,” “Ba’ Kelalan,” “East Kalimantan,” “Payeh Keramut,” “Long Lemutut,” and “the Lemutut River” (FORMADAT, *Highland Tales* 9-11).

The listing of these locations not only emphasizes the Indigenous geographies illustrated by the book’s opening map, but also demonstrates how mythologies are shared across these geographies. Upai Semaring is a figure linked to multiple Orang Ulu communities; one who has travelled between communities and who has developed a unique and ancient relationship to the land. These narratives additionally suggest that the giant had the ability to use, mold, and shape the land. Upai Semaring becomes a figure who symbolizes Indigenous ties to the land, and Indigenous ways of knowing and interacting with natural resources. As Anthony Williams-Hunt, an Orang Asli activist and lawyer explains, “besides its material importance, land has special social and religious significance . . . Land is closely associated with definitions of territory, history and most important of all, culture and identity. It is thus a heritage, metaphorically embodied in the statement that ‘it is from the land that we come and it is to the land that we will eventually go’” (qtd. in Subramaniam 424). While Williams-Hunt is speaking specifically of the Indigenous peoples of the Peninsula here, these sentiments are shared by the Orang Asal of Borneo as well. Upai Semaring’s ability to use large stones to sharpen knives, build stoves, and pound paddy, signal Indigenous cultural/mythological approaches to engaging natural resources, and living from and with the land. These shared stories point, then, to conceptions of Indigenous land use that contradict state narratives justifying the exploitation of Orang Asal lands on the grounds that they are uninhabited or underutilized.

*Highland Tales* circulation beyond the island of Borneo illustrates another aspect of the text’s ability to employ capitalist forces in the service of Indigenous interests. The book, and members of the Orang Ulu communities who contributed to it, were featured at an event on April 9, 2016, at Silverfish Books, a leading independent bookstore and publisher in Kuala Lumpur. Described as “an evening of legends and ancient tales with the highlanders of the Heart of Borneo,” the event drew an audience of over 100 (Silverfish Books, “An Evening” and “From Borneo”). The visibility and popularity of this event, in the heart of urban Malaysia, demonstrates how *Highland Tales* is asserting the presence and visibility of the Orang Asal beyond Borneo. The text and its contributions are carrying Indigenous narratives to Peninsular Malaysia, where audiences are largely unaware of Orang Asal histories and cultures. As Silverfish Books notes in their Facebook post following the April 9 performance,

we learnt that the Orang Ulu community who live in the highlands Borneo, including the Kelabit, Lun Bawang, Lundayeh and Sa’ban people, are a common people divided by three borders between Sabah, Sarawak and Indonesia, albeit with their own dialects and cultural nuances, but rooted at the core with parallel mythology and oral history. This is what happens when arbitrary lines are drawn in the dirt to demarcate modern political entities with little regard for people who have lived in the lands for centuries. (Silverfish Books, “From Borneo”)

The publisher’s comments demonstrate how the event, the text, and the Orang Ulu participants draw attention to the links between Indigenous peoples in Borneo and the artificial nature of national boundaries that divide these communities. The text, as well as this performance at Silverfish Books, thus illustrate what Colin Nicholas, Jenita Engi, and Teh Yen Ping explain is a “very localized and site-specific” understanding of Indigenous customary land, one that often encompasses an intimate knowledge of natural resources and histories (23). While Nicholas, Engi, and Ping are describing here the land rights perspectives of the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia, Indigenous communities in Borneo have similarly localized views of land rights. For example, the Penan of Sarawak “have ties with areas in which they individually claim resources (e.g. sago tress) that they nurture and where their ancestors are buried” (Endicott, “Indigenous Rights” 151). Whereas exceptional multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism connect a composite national identity to economic development (in the quest to attain First World nation status), *Highland Tales* emphasizes specific ties to land and livelihoods that are simultaneously trans-Indigenous and transnational.

My reading of *Highland Tales* has attempted to illustrate how both postcolonial capitalism and survivance are intersecting forces in Orang Asal survivance. On the one hand, *Highland Tale’s* mapping of Orang Asal geographies and narratives reinforces Indigenous claims to Borneo. The text’s images and narratives enact survivance through Native stories, the assertion of Native presence, and an attention to site-specific histories that span Indigenous and national borders. In so doing, *Highland Tales* critiques state attempts to erase or negate Indigenous histories and land rights. The sponsorship of state institutions like the Ministry of Tourism Sarawak has facilitated this act of survivance and the circulation of Orang Ulu voices and narratives, even as this and other sponsoring state institutions have also historically participated in the exploitation of Indigenous communities. In this regard then, FORMADAT has chosen to make a strategic alliance with state institutions in order to enact survivance and development on their own terms. In addition, proceeds from the sale of the book will go to support FORMADAT’s efforts, while subsequent events like the one at Silverfish Books might help expand conversations about Indigenous cultural production and Indigenous rights in Malaysia. As a text that is simultaneously a product of postcolonial capitalism, a critique of exceptional multiculturalism, and a vital form of Orang Asal survivance, *Highland Tales* demonstrates how these forces – in both a Malaysian and Indigenous context – are necessarily intertwined.

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1. The acronym FORMADAT comes from the Malay name of the organization, *Forum Masyarakat Adat Dataran Tinggi*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These communities are known collectively as the Orang Ulu, a subset of the Indigenous communities of East Malaysia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The term “Orang Asal” designates the Indigenous communities of Sabah and Sarawak, as well as the Indigenous peoples of the Malaysian Peninsula, known as the Orang Asli (Nicholas, Engi, and Teh 6). The term “asal” comes from the Arabic root “asali,” which is defined as “Indigenous” or “original.” The term was first used during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) by Chinese communists fighting against British colonial rule and the Malayan government. Colin Nicholas notes that the insurgents’ use of the term “Orang Asal” was a strategic one: their recognition of Orang Asal communities as “Indigenous” gained them the sympathy and support of these communities (“Organizing Orang Asli Identity” 120). “Orang Asal” also stood in stark contrast to the terms then in use by colonial powers and the Malayan government. These included especially derogatory names like “Sakai,” meaning slave or servant, and “Orang Liar,” meaning “uncivilized but free men” (Skeat and Blagden qtd. in Nicholas, “Organizing Orang Asli Identity” 120). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, Yee I-Lann’s 2007 *Kinabalu* series takes inspiration from a Kadazandusun creation story in order to examine contemporary relationships between Kadazandusun women. Dusun artist, Eleanor Goroh, and Kadazan artist Adam Kitingan are also part of a revival of Indigenous artistic practices in Borneo. Goroh’s jewelry line, Magic Borneo Beads, and Kitingan’s brand, Sang Tukang, focus on Dusun and Kadazan designs and materials, drawing on their cultural significance as inspiration for creating both traditional and new motifs. In media, Borneo filmmaker Nadira Ilana has recently produced an invaluable collection of short documentaries with and about the Dusun people of Kampung Bongkud. The 2016 project, *Big Stories Bongkud-Namaus*, a collaboration with the Australian series, *Big Stories, Small Towns,* details the Indigenous folktales of this Dusun community, their contemporary lived experiences, and their aspirations for the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My argument is informed here by Chadwick Allen’s call to build robust “trans-Indigenous” methodologies (378). Allen, a leading scholar of Native American and Comparative Indigenous Studies, has stressed the importance of developing “a broad set of emerging practices designed explicitly to privilege reading *across*, *through*, and *beyond* tribally and nationally specific Indigenous texts and contexts” (378). My attention to *Highland Tales* as a text that encompasses multiple Indigenous communities and spans Malaysian and Indonesian borders is one avenue through which I attempt to enact this kind of reading. My engagement with Native American Studies as a field that informs my reading of *Highland Tales* is also a methodological approach to developing this kind of international, comparative analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The government instituted these measures following the historic race riots of May 1969 and in response to repeated calls by Malays for increased socio-economic power. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These policies for structuring multicultural society in Malaysia – and their inciting events – were unfolding around the same period that multiculturalism was emerging in global debates. As Ali Rattansi notes, “‘multiculturalism’ entered public discourses in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when both Australia and Canada began to declare their support for it” (7). Academic and public conversations about the term and its implications in the United States and the U.K. also flourished from the late 1980s into the 2000s. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to 2016 population estimates by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia, the country has a national population of 31.7 million. Malays and Orang Asal constitutes 69% of the population, Chinese 23%, Indians 7%, and others 1%. While the Malaysian census only offers combined numbers for the Malays and the Orang Asal, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs estimates that the country’s Indigenous population is approximately 14%, totaling around 4,300,000, excluding the states of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The term “Orang Asli” refers only to the Indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. This term excludes the Indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, located on the island of Borneo (East Malaysia). These communities are divided broadly into Anak Negeri (Sabah) and the Dayak and Orang Ulu (Sarawak). The term “Orang Asal” that has been used up to this point in this article includes the Anak Negeri, Dayak, and Orang Ulu, as well as the Orang Asli. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Malaysia’s first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, suggested that, “there was no doubt that the Malays were the indigenous peoples of this land because the original inhabitants did not have any form of civilization compared with the Malays… and instead lived like primitives in mountains and thick jungle” (qtd. in Nicholas, “Organizing Orang Asli Identity”). Echoing this sentiment, Malaysia’s longest serving and most controversial Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, has argued that “the Malays are the original or indigenous people of Malaya and the only people who can claim Malaya as their one and only country . . . the Orang Melayu or Malays have always been the definitive people of the Malay Peninsula. The aborigines were never accorded any such recognition nor did they claim such recognition . . . Above all, at no time did they outnumber the Malays” (qtd. in Nicholas, “Organizing Orang Asli Identity”). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Bersih” means “clean”—the rallying cry of the movement’s call for an end to corruption in government.

    In 2007, 2011, 2012, and 2016, Malaysians took to the streets in the tens of thousands under the leadership of Bersih, The Coalition of Free and Fair Elections, that comprises over 80 NGOs. These rallies have been buoyed by the support of Malaysians living abroad, with rallies in 40-80 countries around the world, drawing thousands in total attendance. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In March 2015, 10,000 Malaysians protested the imprisonment of opposition leader and former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. Malaysians organized under the banner of “Kita Lawan” – “We Will Fight” – a youth movement that successfully led the peaceful downtown protest, despite the police having designated it an illegal demonstration (“Rally Ends”). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Negara-Ku was launched in July 2014 (Gomez, “New Movement”). Negara-Ku is led by Ambiga Sreenevasan, former co-chair of Bersih 2.0 and past president of the Malaysian Bar Association, and A. Samad Said, Malaysia’s national laureate. At the launch of Negara-Ku, Sreenevasan explained that “the reason we need this movement is because there is no leadership. So we need to take leadership and ownership and restore hope using this movement” (qtd. in Gomez, “New Movement”). Her comments highlight Malaysians’ increasing frustration with the status quo, as well as their investment in facilitating change. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Abolish the Sedition Act movement (abbreviated in Malay as GHAH), was launched on September 15, 2014, and brings together over 100 civil society groups (Gomez, “112 NGOs”). In the wake of numerous arrests of elected politicians, academics, and lawyers, GHAH is demanding that the Sedition Act be repealed and that all sedition charges be dropped (Gomez, “112 NGOs”). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)