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

Postcolonial Capitalism, & Multiculturalism[[1]](#footnote-1)

**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[[2]](#footnote-2)). 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.[[3]](#footnote-3) *Highland Tales* documents the cultural and geographic narratives of these Orang Asal[[4]](#footnote-4) lands and communities, drawing on the knowledge of village elders across the island of Borneo, which is divided between Malaysia and Indonesia. The form, content, and production of *Highland Tales* position this unique text at the intersection of literature and postcolonial capitalism. As part of an emerging body of cultural texts by Indigenous authors in East Malaysia, *Highland Tales* keeps company with 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.[[5]](#footnote-5) Within this growing corpus of writing by and about Indigenous peoples, *Highland Tales* stands apart as a collection of oral histories and mythologies narrated by multiple Orang Asal community members and leaders, spanning half a dozen Indigenous communities located in two different countries. 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, and the text has been marketed explicitly as a collection of *stories*.[[6]](#footnote-6) In keeping with this framing of the text, I read *Highland Tales* with a focus on its literary qualities, recognizing that these cultural narratives illuminate Indigenous worldviews through both literary and ethnographic forms. My analysis of content and form in this article is paired with a critique of the text’s production. Rather than relying on independent or allied publishers, *Highland Tale*s is co-sponsored by state agencies such as the Forest Department and the Ministry of Tourism Sarawak. As a product of these agencies, the text is marketed as a tool for ecotourism intended to generate revenue for the state. Representing a multiplicity of narratives, geographies, and stakeholders, *Highland Tales* is, therefore, an especially generative text through which to engage the question of literature and postcolonial capitalism.

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 a form of capitalist survivance that employs the very systems that exploit Indigenous peoples to assert Indigenous presence and agency; second, as an Indigenous critique of state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism. In both these readings, I argue that this collaborative Orang Asal projectis a unique example of what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor would term “survivance”[[7]](#footnote-7) – Indigenous “stories that mediate and undermine the literature of dominance” (*Manifest Manners* 12). Vizenor defines survivance as a term that 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). In a Native American context, survivance asserts “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion” (Vizenor, “Aesthetics” 1). In using survivance, a foundational concept in Indigenous Studies, as a framework for my argument, I aim to develop analysis that crosses Indigenous and national boundaries, illuminating the dynamic agency and interconnected forces that shape Orang Asal narratives in Malaysia.

My approach here is attentive to Kuan-Hsing Chen’s argument 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 generative 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.

In the first strand of this argument, my analysis of *Highland Tales* illustrates how Orang Asal survivance is entwined with state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism, forces which are inextricable from one another and from the text itself. FORMADAT has chosen to ally itself with the institutions that have, historically, participated in the exploitation of Indigenous 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 narratives made possible by this alliance illuminate Orang Asal claims to ancestral lands and preserve Indigenous histories, despite efforts by state polices to coopt Indigenous culture, lands and resources. In addition, *Highland Tales* portrays Orang Asal survivance as both trans-Indigenous[[8]](#footnote-8) and transnational. I use these terms together to signal that the text documents stories 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.

Through this reading of *Highland Tales*, I argue that postcolonial capitalism actually enables Orang Asal survivance and self-representation, even as the text also functions as a tool of postcolonial capitalism. 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, and demonstrates how the Orang Asal are strategically employing the tools of postcolonial capitalism to advance their own interests. This alliance also demonstrates that there is no clear delineation between multiculturalism and developmentalism in Malaysia. These two forces directly inform one another as racial logics shape both the marketing of Malaysian multiculturalism and the resources exploited for development.

The second strand of my argument will illustrate how *Highland Tales*, as a product of Orang Asal survivance, critiques the systemic exploitation facilitated by state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism. In order to do so, I will situate the text within a nexus of initiatives by the Malaysian government which commodifies Indigenous culture and exploits Indigenous resources for national development projects. These efforts work in tandem with the state’s 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. Instead, it privileges 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 is informed by 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 terms 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). Sanyal articulates here the need to critique developmental governmentality through an attention to those who are marginalized and dispossessed by state policies and projects. My analysis of *Highland Tales* centers this critique by demonstrating how the seizure of Indigenous lands and the commodification of Indigenous cultures are central to the workings of developmental governmentality in Malaysian. The state masks the realities of this systemic exploitation by touting, instead, the necessity of rapid development in order to achieve “First World” nation status; this goal, I argue, is the guiding ambition of exceptional multiculturalism. My reading of *Highland Tales* illustrates how these Orang Asal communities have co-opted some of the mechanisms of postcolonial capitalism in order to enact survivance, critique multiculturalism, and envision development on their own terms.

 In recent decades, exceptional 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 to the present 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 articulate the state’s ambitions 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 – a harmonious, multicultural nation that secures both racial harmony and economic parity with “First World” nations. As a form of capitalist survivance that critiques this narrative, *Highland Tales* asserts Indigenous claims to the communities, resources, and histories that are coopted by developmental governmentality. The text affirms 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.

**Multiculturalism, Development, and Postcolonial Capitalism**

Before I turn to the text itself, it would be useful to contextualize my engagement with multiculturalism and its relationship to development and postcolonial capitalism in Malaysia. As noted earlier, the state’s focus on multiculturalism has gained additional traction in the last few decades, particularly through the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” and “1Malaysia” campaigns. 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 (NEP) of 1970.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This policy was instrumental in structuring racial divisions and conceptions of indigeneity within a multicultural framework.[[10]](#footnote-10) Through the NEP, the state instituted a series of affirmative action policies aimed at improving the socio-political status of *bumiputeras*, a category which designates both the Malays and the Orang Asal as Indigenous “‘sons/daughters of the soil’” (Andaya and Andaya 282). However, these initiatives were quickly corrupted, consolidating wealth and power among elite Malays, while ignoring the needs of the Orang Asal and less privileged Malays. In essence, the *bumiputera* system reinforces the right of Malays to position themselves as Indigenous rulers, entrenching “constructed indigeneity” in law and public policy (Goh and Holden 8).[[11]](#footnote-11) At its core, then, the history of Malaysian multiculturalism is one of economic, racial, and political control over diverse populations which are strategically compartmentalized.[[12]](#footnote-12) These power dynamics are illustrative of Stuart Hall’s conception of multiculturalism as “the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up” (209). In Malaysia, these strategies include a concerted effort to celebrate plurality and harmony in order to mask the problems of racial stratification and the “politicization of ethnic identities” (Andaya and Andaya 4).[[13]](#footnote-13)

As a result, racial hierarchies shape both development and postcolonial capitalism in Malaysia, which rely on the exploitation of Indigenous communities. As Robert Young explains, “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). From the viewpoint of the Malaysian state, Indigenous communities represent an obstacle to national progress. Leonard Andaya notes that “the [Malays] now regard the Orang Asli[[14]](#footnote-14) 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).[[15]](#footnote-15) Instead, state narratives of modernity are framed through racial hierarchies that fuse development, postcolonial capitalism, and multiculturalism. Najib’s explanation of the 1Malaysia platform articulates how these forces are intimately entwined:

1Malaysia is a concept to foster unity amongst the multi-ethnic *rakyat* of Malaysia, substantiated by key values that every Malaysian should observe. The approach is not independent of the Government’s policies thus far. Instead, it complements them to further reinforce our solidarity in order to guarantee stability towards achieving higher growth and development for Malaysia and her people. (Razak, The 1Malaysia Concept)

Here, Najib explicitly links development with multiculturalism, arguing that racial harmony and unity are necessary factors for ensuring “growth and development.” In fact, exceptional multiculturalism relies on the language of a united, communal struggle. As Najib explains, “Malaysia is on the brink of developed nation status. Committed as one, we can achieve this goal” (Razak, “What a Remarkable Journey”). Attaining “developed nation status” is marked as the ultimate goal of Malaysian multiculturalism, bolstered by claims of racial harmony and solidarity.

In a Malaysian context, therefore, multiculturalism, development, and postcolonial capitalism are deeply interconnected. The Orang Asal pay the price for this form of developmental governmentality, which both commodifies Indigenous cultural practices and exploits Indigenous lands and resources. For example, tourism campaigns market indigeneity as one of many facets of Malaysia’s racial diversity,[[16]](#footnote-16) even as state and private corporations displace Orang Asal communities from their customary land; large-scale development projects primarily occur on Indigenous land (Endicott, “Indigenous Rights” 150). According to the 1Malaysia campaign, the construction of major 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). This “commitment” to resource development on Indigenous lands is facilitated by laws that invalidate Indigenous land rights and render Indigenous peoples wards of the state. In addition, the state works to diminish the political influence of the Orang Asal while simultaneously encouraging the conversion and assimilation of Indigenous communities.[[17]](#footnote-17) Exceptional multiculturalism, development, and postcolonial capitalism are inextricably linked here; they are structured according to a racial logic that justifies the exploitation of the Orang Asal, even as indigeneity is marketed as one facet of the country’s racial diversity.

In response to this long and ongoing history of Indigenous rights’ violations, the Orang Asal have been actively advocating for legal and cultural recognition. These efforts include 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 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. Alongside these efforts, Malaysian civic engagement has also taken on various forms in the last two decades, spurred by increasing disenchantment with government corruption, systemic racial divisions, and the suppression of civil rights. This disillusionment has manifested itself through the radical increase in electoral participation, the formation of new opposition parties (most notably Parti Keadilan Rakyat or PKR),[[18]](#footnote-18) massive public protests, and a rise in social justice movements.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Malaysians’ frustration with governmental dysfunction, corruption, and hypocrisy came to a dramatic head during the 2018 general elections (GE14). In a surreal turn of events, the opposition party, PKR, led by Dr. Wan Azizah binti Wan Ismail, joined forces with establishment politician and former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. As the country’s longest-serving Prime Minister (1981-2003), Mahathir oversaw the deepening of racial and class divisions, the centralizing of state power, and the quashing of political dissent.[[20]](#footnote-20) Most notably, Mahathir ousted his former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Wan Azizah’s husband, who was later arrested on what was widely considered politically motivated charges.[[21]](#footnote-21) Having recently emerged as a vocal critic of Najib – his former protégé – and having joined Malaysians in public protests of government corruption, Mahathir joined Wan Azizah to lead the new opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (Hope Alliance). At the age of 92, Mahathir was the coalition’s candidate for Prime Minister against his own party (UMNO),[[22]](#footnote-22) with Wan Azizah running for the position of Deputy Prime Minister. On May 9, 2018, Pakatan Harapan defeated the Barisan Nasional coalition led by UMNO and Najib, winning 113 of 222 parliament seats (“Results Overview”). Shortly thereafter, Mahathir and Wan Azizah were sworn in as Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister and, following a royal pardon, Anwar Ibrahim was released from prison. The ramifications of these historic developments are still unfolding and their implications for Malaysia’s Indigenous communities are also uncertain. However, there have already been efforts to establish a new ministry focused on Indigenous issues and to increase Indigenous representation in parliament (Loh). Given this shifting landscape, *Highland Tales* becomes an even more compelling text through which to consider how the Orang Asal situate themselves within postcolonial and multicultural contexts.

**Capitalist Survivance: A Strategic Alliance**

In order to understand the significance of *Highland Tales* as a form of Orang Asal survivance that both relies on and critiques 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. According to FORMADAT, the preservation of Indigenous communities in Borneo necessitates the protection of Indigenous cultural traditions, intellectual property, and ancestral lands.

Guided by this mission, *Highland Tales* aims to promote 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. In so doing, the map signals a reimagining of Borneo’s borders, situating them not only in relation to the national boundaries that divide Malaysia and Indonesia, but also in relation to “shared” boundaries between Indigenous communities. Concise notes on each district identify these Orang Ulu communities as the region’s “majority” populations, summarize their primary economic activities, and describe shared borders. These small details – cataloged in square boxes across the base of the map – assert the presence and vitality of Orang Ulu communities in Borneo.

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 as 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, 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. As Colin Nichols, director of the Center for Orang Asli Concerns has noted, it is not the case that Indigenous peoples in Malaysia are “anti-development.” Instead, they choose to pursue development “on their own terms” (Nicholas, “The Orang Asli: First” 327). In *Highland Tales*, 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). Here, Sultan signals that the Indigenous narratives collected in *Highland Tales* are both communal and discrete. The metaphor of a “core” that is “rooted” in “parallel mythology” conveys the idea that these stories are part of cultural networks that link, connect, and diverge, but which remain grounded together in a shared center.

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 alternative 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. At the same time, however, these historical/mythological narratives about Upai Semaring serve as the material that facilitates ecotourism’s engagement with Indigenous lands in the present. In other words, *Highland Tales* gathers stories about Orang Asal lands which, used as a guide for tourists, makes possible contemporary, capitalist forms of land use.

*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.

**Capitalist Survivance & Postcolonial Critique**

The visual and narrative representations of these Indigenous conceptions of land, culture, and community also function as a form of survivance that critiques multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism. The maps which open *Highland Tales* not only situate the reader within Orang Ulu communities in Borneo, but also challenge how rural and Indigenous landscapes are featured in Malaysian 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 landscapes 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 marketing of Malaysian geographies in the service of the tourism industry is challenged by maps that reclaim Indigenous lands and redraw national borders. The map visually and linguistically asserts the presence and vitality of Orang Ulu communities in Borneo, despite state campaigns that erase Indigenous peoples, even while state agencies appropriate their lands and resources.

Development and multiculturalism are inextricably linked here. Racial logics structure the laws that facilitate the exploitation of Indigenous communities, in order to make possible development projects that are central to exceptional multiculturalism. Land rights policies, especially those in East Malaysia, 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 Orang Asal 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). Race, class, and politics converge here as the driving forces of development, especially as it impacts Indigenous communities.

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.[[23]](#footnote-23) 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). 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.

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 Asal to participate in ecotourism initiatives, while simultaneously asserting their right to protect Indigenous lands, cultures, and communities. FORMADAT’s mission expresses an explicit commitment to “conservation and sustainable development,” linking these efforts to the “protection of cultural and historical sites” (FORMADAT, “Vision). This commitment, which informs the creation of *Highland Tales*, points to the ways in which the text relies on state agencies, government funding, and ecotourism in order to enact survivance.

My reading of *Highland Tales* illustrates how both postcolonial capitalism and exceptional multiculturalism are intersecting forces in Orang Asal survivance. The text enacts survivance through the narration of Indigenous stories and the visual mapping of Orang Asal communities, both of which span Indigenous and national borders. The sponsorship of state institutions like the Ministry of Tourism Sarawak has facilitated the preservation and circulation of Orang Ulu voices and histories, even as the text itself critiques state exploitation of Indigenous communities. In other words, FORMADAT has chosen to make a strategic alliance with state agencies in order to enact capitalist survivance – to participate, on their own terms, in ecotourism. 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. I am grateful for the detailed feedback from both the peer reviewers and the special issue editors. Their invaluable suggestions helped me strengthen the focus and structure of this article at key stages in its development. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The acronym FORMADAT comes from the Malay name of the organization, *Forum Masyarakat Adat Dataran Tinggi*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These communities are known collectively as the Orang Ulu, a subset of the Indigenous communities of East Malaysia. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 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-4)
5. In 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. These include, for example, Yee I-Lann’s 2007 *Kinabalu* series, which 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. This 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-5)
6. This is evidenced, for example, by an event at Silverfish Books, an independent bookstore in Kuala Lumpur, promoting the book’s publication. Posters for the event, which took place 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 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-8)
9. 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-9)
10. 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-10)
11. This system 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. According to 2017 population estimates by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia, the country has a national population of 32 million. Malays and Orang Asal (under the category *bumiputera*) constitute 68.8% of the population, Chinese 23.2%, 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 (identified in their report as “the peoples of the Orang Asli, the Orang Ulu, and the Anak Negri groups”) constitutes approximately 13.8% of the country’s 2015 population (31,660,700 million). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While Malaysian multiculturalism shares similarities with that of neighboring Indonesia and Singapore, the clearest point of contrast is the *explicit* compartmentalization of diversity and difference that structures Malaysian society. In *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (2001), Robert W. 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” (29). By contrast, Indonesia rejects the idea of “differentiating citizenship along ethnic lines,” choosing instead “policies that [are] officially inclusive and non-discriminatory” (Hefner 27). 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 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-14)
15. 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 now recently re-elected 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-15)
16. In this regard, the Malaysian government’s approach to managing Indigenous populations share important similarities with that of the Canadian government. As Sam McKegney notes, “Canadian multiculturalism . . . 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). In Malaysia, not only are the Orang Asal subsumed within Malaysian nationalism (dominated by claims of Malay supremacy), they are also marketed as one of many “shards” within a Malaysian “mosaic,” to borrow McKegney’s metaphor. For example, the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” tourism campaign depicts Indigenous communities alongside a variety of racial/ethnic group that purportedly make Malaysia both “truly” multicultural and “truly” Asian. While there are certainly important economic distinctions between Malaysia and Canada – Canada is, of course, a developed as opposed to a *developing* nation – my attention in this comparison rests on the cultural dynamics of multiculturalism that both countries share: their approach to situating Indigenous populations – racially and culturally – vis a vis multiculturalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For a detailed discussion of the legal, political, and cultural systems that facilitate this process, see *The Orang Asli and the UNDRIP: From Rhetoric to Recognition* (2010) by Colin Nicholas, Jenita Engi, and Teh Yen Ping. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The most influential among these is Parti Keadlian Rakyat (PKR), a crucial player in the upheaval surrounding the 2008 general elections. This historic election resulted in Barisan Nasional – the ruling party since 1957 – losing its two thirds majority in Parliament for the very first time. This outcome was the result of Malaysians voting across racial parties – a dramatic departure from a system of political engagement that has historically been structured according to strict racial divisions. PKR was formed in 2003, shortly after the arrest of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on what was widely viewed as politically motivated charges. The party was lead by Anwar’s wife, Dr. Wan Azizah binti Wan Ismail, who now serves as the country’s first female Deputy Prime Minister. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. These movements include, among many, BERSIH, Negara-Ku (Our Country), GHAH, and Kita Lawan (We Will Fight). 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 protests in 40-80 countries around the world, drawing thousands in total attendance. Negara-Ku was launched in July 2014 under the leadership of 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 (Gomez, “New Movement”). 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”). The Abolish the Sedition Act movement (abbreviated in Malay as GHAH), was launched just a few months later – September 15, 2014 – and brought together over 100 civil society groups (Gomez, “112 NGOs”). In the wake of numerous arrests of elected politicians, academics, and lawyers, GHAH demanded that the Sedition Act be repealed and that all sedition charges be dropped (Gomez, “112 NGOs”). In March 2015, 10,000 Malaysians protested the re-imprisonment of opposition leader and former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. This protest was organized under the banner 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-19)
20. See Chin-Huat Wong’s *New York Times* OpEd, “Why Malaysia’s Opposition Picked an Old Foe as its New Leader,” for a detailed overview of this history and Mahathir’s return to politics. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Following emerging political differences between Anwar, Mahathir, and UMNO in the late 1990s, Anwar was fired, charged with sodomy, and then imprisoned for six years before the sodomy charge was overturned in 2004. Following his release and the significant gains made by PKR, Anwar was charged and acquitted repeatedly before being finally jailed in 2014 (“Anwar Ibrahim Acquitted”). Human rights organizations and bar associations around the world have severely criticized the Malaysian government for blatantly targeting the de-facto leader of the opposition coalition, drawing international attention to this local scandal. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has lead the Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled Malaysia since independence from British rule in 1957. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Recent estimates place the Taib family fortune at $15 billion – a fortune derived, at least in part, from these kinds of projects (Bosshard). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)