

Highland Tales in the Heart of Borneo:
Postcolonial Capitalism, Multiculturalism,
and Survivance
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Abstract: *Highland Tales in the Heart of Borneo* (2015) showcases Indigenous oral histories and mythologies that span half a dozen Orang Asal communities across East Malaysia and Indonesia. This article proposes two interconnected readings of *Highland Tales* to demonstrate how the text is entwined with postcolonial capitalism and Malaysian multiculturalism. First, through an analysis of form, production, and circulation, it argues that *Highland Tales* serves as a unique example of what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor terms “survivance”—Indigenous “stories that mediate and undermine the literature of dominance” (*Manifest Manners* 12). This analysis demonstrates that *Highland Tales* transforms the very systems that exploit Indigenous peoples into a mechanism for celebrating Indigenous culture. More specifically, capitalist survivance is both trans-Indigenous and transnational, employing a strategic partnership with state ecotourism. Second, this article considers how *Highland Tales* critiques state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism. Malaysia’s government persistently markets the country as a uniquely diverse nation where racial harmony is bolstered by rapid development. Postcolonial capitalism in Malaysia is, therefore, structured according to a narrative of multiculturalism and modernization that relies on the exploitation of Indigenous peoples, lands, and resources. Employing the tools of postcolonial capitalism, *Highland Tales* disrupts narratives of racial harmony and economic development by amplifying Orang Asal narratives and advancing Indigenous cultural and economic interests.

Keywords: Malaysia, Orang Asal literature, multiculturalism, national development, survivance

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 (also known as FORMADAT).¹ FORMADAT is a transnational grassroots organization representing the Lundayeh/Lun Bawang, Kelabit, and Sa'ban communities of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia, as well as those of East Kalimantan in Indonesia.² *Highland Tales* documents the cultural and geographic narratives of these Orang Asal communities,³ drawing on the knowledge of village elders across the island of Borneo, which is divided between Malaysia and Indonesia. For the collection, Indigenous leaders and community members “shared their knowledge of cultural and heritage sites and folklores” with Alica Ng, Senior Community Engagement and Education Officer for the World Wildlife Fund in Malaysia (Sultan qtd. in WWF-Malaysia). Ng was responsible for collecting and documenting the narratives, as well as shepherding the project through publication (WWF-Malaysia). Organized by region, the stories within the collection are attributed to the different community members responsible for narrating them. Because of the factors shaping its form, production, and circulation, *Highland Tales* lies 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 that draw on Iban legends and children's books by Jainal Amambing that illustrate village life in Borneo.⁴ 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 in Malaysia and Indonesia. While it is, in many ways, an ethnographic text, *Highland Tales* is also positioned as a literary one. Both its title and marketing campaign frame the text as a collection of stories emerg-

ing from and immersed in the Highlands of Borneo. Therefore, I read *Highland Tales* with a focus on its literary, visual, and narrative qualities, recognizing that this cultural text illuminates Indigenous worldviews through both literary and ethnographic forms.

My attention to content and form in this article is paired with an analysis of the production of *Highland Tales*. Specifically, I map the conflicting forces that shape this text and suggests that the Orang Asal have chosen a unique and strategic alliance to advance their own interests. Rather than relying on independent or allied publishers, *Highland Tales* is co-sponsored by state agencies such as the Forest Department and the Ministry of Tourism Sarawak, which have a long history of exploiting Indigenous communities. 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.

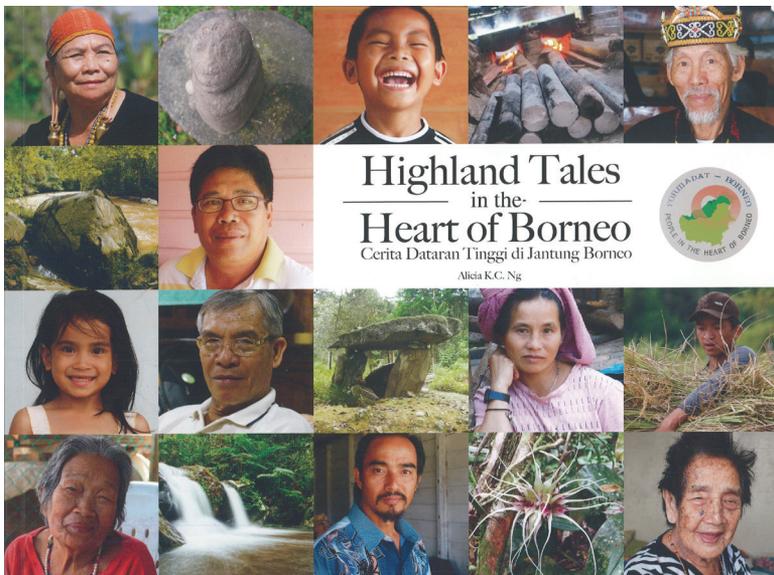


Fig. 1. Front cover of *Highland Tales in the Heart of Borneo*.

Given the forces that shape both the form and publication of *Highland Tales*, I would like to propose two interconnected readings of the 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 post-colonial capitalism. In both readings, I argue that this collaborative Orang Asal project is a unique example of what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor terms “survivance”⁵—that is, Indigenous “stories that mediate and undermine the literature of dominance” (*Manifest Manners* 12). Vizenor defines survivance as “the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb *survive*, ‘to remain alive or in existence,’ to outlive, [and] persevere” (“Aesthetics” 19; emphasis in original). In a Native American context, survivance asserts “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion” (1). In using this foundational concept in Indigenous Studies as a framework for my argument, I aim to develop an analysis that crosses Indigenous and national boundaries, illuminating the dynamic agency and interconnected forces that shape Orang Asal narratives in Malaysia.⁶

In the first strand of this argument, I illustrate 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 two 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 the case of *Highland Tales*, 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 state efforts to co-opt Indigenous culture, lands, and resources. In addition, *Highland Tales* portrays Orang Asal survivance as both trans-Indigenous⁷ and trans-national. I use these terms together to signal that the text documents stories that span multiple Indigenous communities (the Lundayeh/

Lun Bawang, Kelabit, and Sa'ban people) and both Indonesian and Malaysian territories. In so doing, *Highland Tales* testifies to 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 enables Orang Asal survivance and self-representation even as the text 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 how capitalism itself can facilitate Indigenous efforts to circumvent and transform capitalist forces. In this case, the sponsorship of state agencies and the use of state resources to publish *Highland Tales* amplifies Indigenous voices and histories in Malaysia, demonstrating how the Orang Asal are strategically employing the tools of postcolonial capitalism to advance their own interests. This alliance between the Orang Asal and state agencies like the Forest Department also demonstrates that there is no clear delineation between multiculturalism and developmentalism in Malaysia. These two forces directly inform one another because, as discussed later in this article, racial hierarchies shape both the state's marketing of Malaysian multiculturalism and the resources it exploits for national development.

The second strand of my argument investigates how *Highland Tales*, as a product of Orang Asal survivance, critiques the systemic exploitation facilitated by state multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism. I situate the text within a nexus of initiatives by the Malaysian government that commodifies Indigenous culture and exploits Indigenous resources for national development projects. These efforts work in tandem with the state's framing of Malaysia as an exemplary Asian nation. Through national campaigns like former Prime Minister Najib Razak's “1Malaysia” platform and the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” tourism campaign, as well as through federal laws and economic policies, the government advertises Malaysia as a developing nation that is uniquely diverse, harmonious,

and progressive. 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 relies on the exploitation of Indigenous peoples, lands, and resources. *Highland Tales* disrupts this narrative by challenging the multicultural framing of the nation. Instead, the collection privileges Indigenous stories and land rights that predate, and persist despite, the Malaysian state.

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 toward "the space of the marginal and the dispossessed" in order to "politicize development" (255). Sanyal explains 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). This critique of developmental governmentality requires an examination of how state policies marginalize and dispossess minority populations in particular. My analysis of *Highland Tales* demonstrates how the seizure of Indigenous lands and the commodification of Indigenous cultures are central to the workings of developmental governmentality in Malaysia. The state masks the realities of this systemic exploitation by touting the necessity of rapid development in order to achieve First World nation status; this goal, I argue, is the guiding ambition of exceptional multiculturalism.

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 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. *Highland Tales* critiques this narrative by asserting Indigenous claims to the communities, resources, and histories that are co-opted by developmental governmentality.

I. 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 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 Malay 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 in Malaysia 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 1970.⁸

This policy was instrumental in structuring racial divisions and conceptions of indigeneity within a multicultural framework.⁹ 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 reinforced the right of Malays to position themselves as Indigenous rulers, entrenching “constructed indigeneity” in law and public policy (Goh and Holden 8).¹⁰ At its core, the history of Malaysian multiculturalism is one of economic, racial, and political control over diverse populations which are strategically compartmentalized.¹¹ 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).¹²

More specifically, development and postcolonial capitalism in Malaysia rely on the displacement of Indigenous communities. As 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 Asli¹³ 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).¹⁴ Instead, state narratives of modernity rely on 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* [citizens] 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 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 actuality, however, 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 diversity¹⁵ even as state and private corporations displace Orang Asal communities to make room for large-scale development projects, which primarily occur on Indigenous lands (Endicott 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.¹⁶ 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 United Nations 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),¹⁷ massive public protests, and a rise in social justice movements.¹⁸

Malaysians' frustration with governmental dysfunction, corruption, and hypocrisy came to a dramatic head during the 2018 general elections, referred to as GE14. In a surreal turn of events, the opposition PKR party, 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.¹⁹ Most notably, Mahathir ousted his former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Wan Azizah's husband, who was later arrested on what were widely considered politically motivated charges.²⁰ Having recently emerged as a vocal critic of Najib (Mahathir's former protégé) and having joined Malaysians in public protests of government corruption, Mahathir partnered with Wan Azizah to lead the new opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (Hope Alliance). At the age of 92, Mahathir became the coalition's candidate for Prime Minister against his own party (UMNO),²¹ with Wan Azizah running for the position of Deputy Prime Minister. On 9 May 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 uncertain. However, there have already been efforts to establish a new ministry focused on Indigenous issues and 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.

II. 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). 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). 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* promotes the visibility of Indigenous geographies and histories. 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 seventy-eight-page color text that records and preserves the significance of Indigenous lands alongside the histories and mythologies of the Orang Asal.

Visually, the text foregrounds 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 Asal communities as the region's majority populations, sum-

marize 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.



Figs. 2 and 3. The opening English-language maps in *Highland Tales*, marking key regions of Borneo and their Indigenous populations.

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, 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 book’s usefulness 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” (iii). Subsequent maps throughout the book offer transportation options for travel to each of the Indigenous regions discussed in the text, including useful tourist tips and important geographic markers.

Here, Orang Asal survivance co-opts 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 Nicholas, director of the Center for Orang Asli Concerns has noted, it is not the case that Indigenous peoples in Malaysia are “anti-development” (“The Orang Asli” 327). Instead, they choose to pursue development “on their own terms” (327). In *Highland Tales*, Orang Asal survivance is made possible, at least in part, through the mechanisms of postcolonial capitalism. Tourism campaigns, transportation logistics, and state sponsorship facilitate, in this case, the visibility of Orang Asal communities, histories, and cultures.

Importantly, these geographic and cultural narratives are presented as shared aspects of Indigenous communities across Malaysia and Indonesia, illustrating how Orang Asal survivance is both trans-Indigenous and transnational. 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 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 remain grounded in a shared center.

A recurring legend throughout the text that exhibits these parallel qualities focuses on the giant Upai Semaring. He is referenced in at least four different stories, 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 explains that the giant is “called Upai Semaring by the Lun Bawang” but “was known by the name of Agan Tadun to the Kelabits” (*Highland Tales* xiii). Ganang describes 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 Asal peoples and districts.

Similarly, subsequent stories about Upai Semaring’s art, his sharpening stone and mortar, and his engravings, all illuminate the giant’s links to distinct Indigenous communities and 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. (*Highland Tales* 9)

In the following story, “Giant Sharpening Stone and Mortar,” 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” (11). Both these stories make note of Orang Asal villages, regions, and waterways: Buduk Nur, Ba' Kelalan, East Kalimantan, Payeh Keramut, Long Lemutut, and the Lemutut River (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 mapped across these geographies. Upai Semaring emerges as a figure linked to multiple Orang Ulu communities; he has travelled between these communities and shares in an ancient relationship with these lands and peoples. These narratives additionally suggest that the giant has the ability to use, mold, and shape the land. Upai Semaring becomes a figure who symbolizes Indigenous ties to the land and ways of knowing and interacting with natural resources. As Orang Asli activist and lawyer Anthony Williams-Hunt 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, 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 and mythological approaches to engaging natural resources, living from and with the land. These shared stories point to alternative conceptions of Indigenous land use that contradict state narratives justify-

ing the exploitation of Orang Asal lands on the grounds that they are uninhabited or underutilized. At the same time, however, these 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, employed 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 Asal communities who contributed to it were featured at an event on 9 April 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 one hundred spectators (Silverfish Books, "An Evening"). The visibility and popularity of this event, in the heart of urban Malaysia, demonstrates how *Highland Tales* asserts the presence and visibility of the Orang Asal beyond Borneo. It is especially significant that this event took place in Peninsular Malaysia, where audiences are largely unaware of Orang Asal histories and cultures. As Silverfish Books notes in their Facebook post following the 9 April performance,

we learnt that the Orang Ulu community who live in the highlands [of] 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, text, and the Orang Asal 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 Nicholas et al. explain as 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 et al. describe 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 151). Where exceptional multiculturalism and postcolonial capitalism connect a composite national identity to economic development in Malaysia’s quest to attain First World nation status, *Highland Tales* emphasizes particular ties to land and livelihoods that are simultaneously trans-Indigenous and transnational.

III. Capitalist Survivance & Postcolonial Critique

The maps that open *Highland Tales* not only situate the reader within Orang Asal 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?” (“TM 2000”). 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 voice-over 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 blue waters. Opening with the rhetorical question of “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 the visual transitions as the tourist is invited to explore verdant landscapes that appear entirely uninhabited. The ad thus offers an enticing escape from the oppressive cityscapes of the opening frames, while simultaneously effacing the diversity of the country’s peoples and cultures.

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 mark 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. In other words, this map reclaims Indigenous lands and redraws national borders. Despite state campaigns that erase the presence of Indigenous peoples even while state agencies appropriate Indigenous lands and resources, *Highland Tales* visually and linguistically asserts the presence and vitality of Orang Ulu communities in Borneo.

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. (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” (148). Race, class, and politics converge 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, which are developed on Indigenous lands and were responsible for building the resettlement camps where displaced Indigenous peoples were sent.²² Endicott explains that companies and state agencies target Indigenous lands for logging and hydroelectric dam projects because they tend to be rich in raw materials (15–51). These lands are also cultivated by the Orang Asal using “non-intensive methods . . . giving the illusion that the land is underutilized” (15–151). 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, 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.

Despite these conditions, however, the maps and stories collected in *Highland Tales* articulate a willingness on the part of the Orang Asal to participate in development initiatives like ecotourism while simultaneously asserting their right to protect Indigenous lands, cultures, and

communities. 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, the text represents a strategic alliance between Indigenous peoples and 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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Notes

- 1 The acronym FORMADAT comes from the Malay name of the organization, *Forum Masyarakat Adat Dataran Tinggi*.
- 2 These communities are known collectively as the Orang Ulu, a subset of the Indigenous communities of East Malaysia.
- 3 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 et al. 6). Asal comes from the Arabic root *asali*, which is defined as Indigenous or original. It 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 Orang Asal was strategic: their recognition of Orang Asal communities as “Indigenous” gained them the sympathy and support of these communities (“Organizing Orang Asli Identity” 120).
- 4 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 of which focus on the Orang Asli. 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, among others, Yee I-Lann's 2007 *Kinabalu* series, the work of Dusun and Ka-

- dazan artists Eleanor Goroh and Adam Kitingan, as well as Borneo filmmaker Nadira Ilana's short documentary, *Big Stories Bongkud-Namaus*.
- 5 Vizenor first articulated his theory of "survivance" in *Manifest Manners* and then revised and expanded the concept in the edited anthology *Survivance*.
 - 6 My approach also attends to 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 points 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). Chen proposes this method as an alternative to comparative methodologies in Asian Studies that rely primarily on Western theories or frameworks. Linking Chen's idea of "Asia as method" with survivance allows me to demonstrate how 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.
 - 7 My argument is informed here by Chadwick Allen's call to build robust "trans-Indigenous" methodologies (378). Allen 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; emphasis in original). My attention to *Highland Tales* as a text that encompasses multiple Indigenous communities and spans Malaysian and Indonesian borders is one avenue by which I attempt to enact this kind of reading. My engagement with Native American studies also allows me to develop this kind of international, comparative analysis.
 - 8 The Malaysian 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.
 - 9 The NEP's approach to structuring multicultural society in Malaysia and its inciting events were unfolding around the same period that multiculturalism was being promulgated. As 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 US and UK also flourished from the late 1980s into the 2000s.
 - 10 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).
 - 11 According to 2017 estimates, the country has a total 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% (Department of Statistics, Malaysia). While the Malaysian census offers only 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 Negeri groups") constitutes approximately 13.8% of the country's 2015 population of 31,660,700 million (International Work Group).

- 12 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. Hefner describes this system as one of "asymmetrically differentiated citizenship, which accord[s] 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" (27). In contrast, Singapore touts "an ethnically invisible program of 'shared values'" (41). While Singapore 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 a "selective reinterpretation of Confucian values in a manner that emphasizes loyalty to the state and capitalist self-discipline" (41).
- 13 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. 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.
- 14 This history of cordial and collaborative relations between Malays and the Orang Asal is further obfuscated by political rhetoric that asserts that Malays—and not the Orang Asal—are the country's Indigenous people. For example, 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 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. . . . [T]he 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"). These kinds of claims illustrate how Malay supremacy has become entrenched in both rhetoric and policy.
- 15 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 ethnic groups that constitute Malaysian national identity. 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.
- 16 For a detailed discussion of the legal, political, and cultural systems through which the state works to curtail Indigenous rights, see Nicholas et al.’s *The Orang Asli and the UNDRIP: From Rhetoric to Recognition*.
- 17 Parti Keadlian Rakyat (PKR) was 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, led by Dr. Wan Azizah binti Wan Ismail, who now serves as the country’s first female Deputy Prime Minister.
- 18 These movements include *Bersih*, the Coalition for Clean and Fair elections, which is also known in Malay as *Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil* (2007–present); *Negara-Ku* (My Country, 2014); the Abolish the Sedition Act movement, (*Gerakan Hapus Akta Hasutan* or GHAH, 2014); and *Kita Lawan* (We Will Fight, 2015).
- 19 See Wong for a detailed overview of this history and Mahathir’s return to politics.
- 20 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 charge was overturned in 2004. After his release and on the heels of 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 criticized the Malaysian government for blatantly targeting the de-facto leader of the opposition coalition, drawing international attention to this local scandal.
- 21 The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has led the Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled Malaysia since independence from British rule in 1957.
- 22 Recent estimates place the Taib family fortune at \$15 billion—a fortune derived, at least in part, from these kinds of projects (Bosshard).

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