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A Political Ecology of Remembering for Dayaks of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo

Introduction: De-Centring the White Rajah in the Room

I once said to my father, “Tell me something interesting about our family.”¹ Obliging, he told a tale of our great-great-great-great grandfather and uncles, who decided one day that they would stop paying hefty taxes to the Sultan of Brunei. The burden of increasing taxes was taking its toll, and the villagers were left wondering whether the next harvest would be enough to both feed their families and pay off a distant Sultan whom none of them had ever met. And so, they invited the tax collectors to the village on the pretence of making payment. They ushered the tax collectors, all twenty-one of them, into the *baruk* (a wooden circular hut of ceremonies perched on slim logs). Ambushed, the leading tax collector had his head cut off, and his associates were thrown off the cliff. “We’d had enough of the oppression,” my father said.

Unfortunately, the oppression didn’t stop there. Revenge on behalf of the twenty-one dead tax collectors arrived when several women from the village were kidnapped for ransom. The village was furious. They sent some of their best warriors to rescue the women. During their search, the warriors came across a white man. No one from the village had ever seen a white man before. Fascinated with this strange white man, the warriors asked him to help them overthrow this greedy Sultan, and become their King – their White Rajah. The man listened with compassion and regretfully told the warriors that, while he sympathised, he didn’t feel that he was the right person to unite all the warring tribes and usurp the Sultan. But he could return to Singapore, and see if anyone else might be interested in becoming the White Rajah of Sarawak.

And that is how James Brooke ended up here. That geologist went around Singapore asking for help on our behalf, and James Brooke accepted. You know the rest of the story, lah.

¹ This short narrative was initially published as part of the author’s column on September 10th, 2012, in the currently defunct Malaysian online news-site *The Malaysian Insider*, which was blocked by the country’s internet regulatory body on the grounds of national security in early 2016. The website was subsequently shut down by its owners, citing major financial losses.

But what happened to the missing women?

Oh they eventually found them, killed the kidnappers and everyone returned back to the village. Happy ending!

But it's not very empowering that we asked a white man to save us. Why not one of us to become the Rajah instead?

Haiyah, this is the story as told to me by your great-granduncle. How would I know? I wasn't there. You are always asking too many questions.

My article begins with a remembering from my father, who was a co-theorist for this research, along with a teaching on how to better my methods/responsibilities when working with Indigenous communities, including my own.

Remembering can be a powerful political – and decolonial – act. The stories of my Bidayuh ancestors, like those of many other Indigenous peoples, highlight both the complexity of colonial history and the agency of Indigenous communities in navigating those complexities. I therefore begin this article by remembering my father's and my interlocutors' stories, to (re)claim spaces, sovereignty and knowledge.

Remembering can also be strategic, to invoke a past that serves as a reminder that the state could do better in conserving lands, more-than-humans and protecting native customary rights. Through remembering, Indigenous agency and sovereignty are kept alive and continually refreshed in our minds, bodies and landscapes. While these stories can be interpreted in different ways, the act of remembering keeps these stories alive for present and future generations.

This remembering takes place in native customary domains that are also orang utan conservation landscapes in Sarawak, Malaysia Borneo. In examining the different types of remembering, including *contra-remembering*, I reflect on the framing around the current discourse regarding orang utan conservation in Sarawak, how the framing works in the context of relations with native lands and how Indigenous Ibans may resist this framing in *contra-remembering* ways.

This article builds upon the decolonial themes of Indigenous *survivance* and *refusal*,² focusing on the linkages within the conservation and control thesis of political ecology.³ Political ecology has a long history of engagement with conservation, and the governance of conservation is changing through new forms of resource ownership and control, systems, strategies and new actors. Within

² Vizenor 1999; Simpson 2014.

³ Peluso 1992; Agrawal et al. 1997; Dove 1995; Neumann 1997; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Zimmerer 2000; Jeffrey and Vira 2001; Li 2007; Li 2014; Robbins 2011; Tsing 2005; West 2006.

the conservation and control thesis of political ecology, local producers have lost control of their natural resources and landscapes through the efforts of the state and global interests to preserve sustainability or nature.⁴ In the process, local systems of livelihood, production and sociopolitical organisations are dismantled. Further, “where local production practices have historically been productive and relatively benign, they have been characterized as unsustainable by state authorities or other players in the struggle to control resources.”⁵ For this chapter, I consider the fundamental theoretical propositions of political ecology, including the hegemonic governmentality of conservation,⁶ wilderness as a form of nature that is ostensibly free of human traces or impacts, institutional systems that include traditional resource-management, and current protected areas for conservation which are ecologically and socially problematic and insufficient. I particularly draw on Anishinaabe scholar Vizenor’s work on Indigenous *survivance*,⁷ which refers to the active thriving of Indigenous presence, rather than a mere reaction or a survivable name, over the changing colonial forces. He adds that “native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy.”⁸ Indigenous peoples persist, and sometimes they push back and refuse. I am also inspired by Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson’s deliberation of Indigenous *refusal* as a necessary response towards ongoing colonisation.⁹ Part of the refusal includes moving away from anthropological and ethnological literature on Indigenous communities as no longer a go-to domain of defining the Indigenous political life, and the “construction and definition of Indigeneity itself.”¹⁰ Here in this article, I further explore acts of *refusal* and *survivance* extending from the colonial era towards the present, in response to complex pressures, including conservation interests, onto native customary lands.

This article proceeds in four sections. Firstly, I present collective memories from different Iban and Bidayuh communities (collectively known as Dayak) based on my ethnographic research and my own shared history. I also attend to my positionality as a scholar with Bidayuh heritage, and my own rememberings. Secondly, I explore the broader context of these memories from compiled genealogies or *tusut*, going back twenty-five generations, oral and academic

4 Robbins 2011.

5 Ibid., 178.

6 Foucault 1991.

7 Vizenor 1993.

8 Vizenor 1999, 2.

9 Simpson 2014.

10 Ibid., 33.

literature and empirical data, of which some memories are what I term *contra-remembering*, where remembering is to resist. Thirdly, I demonstrate connections between landscapes and collective memories. Building on political ecology literature, I note how conservation landscapes have never been just sites of doom, but also reflect inspiring periods of resilience and success.¹¹ I argue that our need to remember and rearticulate the past in a way that depicts our agency and resistance is part of our survivance.¹² While I do not fully address the marginalisation of Dayak women's resistance and organising in this article, I acknowledge their current invisibilities in our political and social histories. In the final section, I suggest a framework for a political ecology of *remembering* that builds on decolonial theory and Indigenous scholarship.

The Dream about the Nabau

Apai told me many stories during the months I stayed with him and his family. Some of the stories were designed to keep me happy.¹³ Similar story telling was also conducted for conservationists, researchers and tourists who sometimes stayed in Apai's longhouse. These stories are discussed in the co-authored article "Concealing Protocols: conservation, Indigenous survivance, and the dilemmas of visibility."¹⁴ However, as the months went by, and the tourists and their guides had left, Apai began to recount more personal family narratives of head-hunting by his ancestors, who clashed with other communities over the right to remain on the lands. I was familiar with the themes of these stories, as shared with me by my father, a Bidayuh from Krokong, Bau. In Apai's stories, the terrifying Ukit lived on tree-tops, and flew like birds to get from tree to tree, instead of climbing up the tree trunks. The best plan of attack was to cut down their home trees, before cutting off their heads. Yet the story that struck to me the most, was the story about the Nabau.

Atok Apai (Apai's great-grandfather) once had a dream of the Nabau; a giant water serpent that told him that it would help him defeat his enemies, who were sent by Brooke to retaliate against Atok's community's refusal to pay taxes and to acknowledge the White Rajah as their ruler. "I would poison the Batang Ai lake,"

¹¹ Osterhoudt 2016.

¹² Vizenor 1999.

¹³ I was initially known to the Batang Ai communities about ten years ago (2006–2007) as a conservationist, conducting orang utan fieldwork in their territories.

¹⁴ Rubis and Theriault 2019.

it had said, in support of Atok's refusal, "and make the surrounding jungles so inhospitable and tiring, that when the enemies finally arrive at the lake, they would be so parched and desperate. After drinking the water, the enemies will vomit and perish." And so, as predicted in the dream, that was what had happened. Atok's people were safe from the poisoned waters, and were able to continue bathing and using the lake without any repercussions.

Reflexivity and Methodology

I build on a remembering that was shared with me by Apai, my closest interlocutor, whose community was also very important to my work. He told me the dream as handed down by his family, during a rainy afternoon when we were sitting around in the longhouse, with work in the rice-fields interrupted. It struck me then how the Nabau was woven rather surreptitiously into the stories shared with me by other interlocutors in different Iban communities. For example, whenever I would ask about stories about the orang utan, or other wildlife, the stories would inevitably lead back in some way to the Nabau.

The Nabau comes to life in the Batang Ai landscapes through these stories and also in the places it still supposedly dwells, perhaps more intimately than the orang utan that is often focussed on in the stories shared with tourists, other researchers, including myself, and forestry officials. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for my DPhil research in three Iban communities in Batang Ai, Sarawak, Malaysia for about eight months, between the years 2015 and 2016. When my father unexpectedly died, I was very much in great despair for not only had we lost our father, he was also our keeper of our stories, knowledge and traditions. Unlike many of our close relatives still living in our ancestral village, my dad had one foot in the village, and one foot in the 'modern world.' He bore great communal responsibility as well for being the second qualified Bidayuh medical doctor in Sarawak. As a child growing up in the 1980s in Kuching, a small urban centre of mostly Chinese, Malay and Eurasian townsfolk, and with a prominent father, I felt strong pressure from the urban society to prove that I was 'different/more developed' than my rural kin. When I grew older, moved away for further studies and returned home, only then did I begin to gain a better appreciation of my Bidayuh heritage. Raised with an urban mind-set and direct inquisitiveness, I had many questions for my father.

My father was impatient with the ways I had tried to unsuccessfully connect back to my Bidayuh culture. I thought back of the many times I was chastened for asking too many direct questions about our culture and heritage. He had said

bluntly to me once or twice that I was rude for asking direct or too many questions. This scolding made me reflect on the methodology used for ethnographic fieldwork with rural Indigenous communities.

Conventional ethnographic methodology and ethics guidelines dictate that we ought to present interview questions for a departmental ethics review prior to commencing fieldwork. Yet, I found it was less my direct questioning (which provoked unwanted, stilted responses from my interlocutors, including trying to give me answers that they think I would be happy with), and more through my willingness to be absorbed completely and with as little as judgment as possible, into the way of life in the longhouse, that I was able to learn so much more than I had initially imagined through my research framework.

Thus, after my father's death, I was driven to uncover and reflect on my identity as a Bidayuh person with dual heritage, conducting fieldwork with previously rival Iban communities in my home state, and realising how vast and complex the field space is. I stayed in Sarawak, in my hometown of Kuching, to provide company and support to my mother for a year. The Iban family I was closest to during my research sustained our connections through phone messages and occasional visits to Kuching. As such, I consider my own embodied experience as a scholar born and raised in Sarawak, and also as a local conservationist with extended field experience in Batang Ai, as part of my ethnographic research and field space. In total, I conducted twenty months of ethnographic research in Sarawak, working closely on these topics. During this time, I returned to my father's and ancestors' lands in Bau for supplementary interviews, attended Indigenous land-rights and conservation workshops in Kuching, and talked to Indigenous activists. Throughout, I also reflected particularly on my identity as a Bidayuh. In this section, I highlight the methodological tensions and elaborate on my past connections to Batang Ai and the local Iban communities. In doing so, I explore acts of *refusal* and *survivance* extending from the colonial era towards the present, in response to complex pressures, including conservation interests on native customary lands.

The aforementioned story from my father has played in my mind since his death, especially when I read through my field-notes from Batang Ai and recall similar long conversations with my 'adoptive father,' Apai.¹⁵ Like my father, Apai told me many stories, and some of these stories take form in dreams. For those born and raised in Sarawak, discussing dreams, including dreams of our

¹⁵ Apai means 'father' in Iban, and is a form of respect for Iban male elders. Indai is the female equivalent for Iban female elders, or 'mother.'

¹⁶ Cf. 'reflexive approach': Alvesson and Skolberg 2004; Cresswell 2003.

fore parents, is not considered an unusual activity and helps us make sense of our current reality while recounting our past. In remembering these collective memories, I began to make connections between how we, as Dayaks, have always responded with agency towards complex pressures around land rights and sovereignty.

Journeying Back: On Revisiting my Memories

I arrived in Batang Ai with a fresh intent to (re)learn what I knew of the Iban, and of the orang utan landscapes that have captivated the interest of people beyond Sarawak.

Over a decade ago, I was working for an international NGO, and had conducted orang utan nest-count surveys for over two years in the field. My intent then was specific and narrow, that is, to count the nests and observe the habitats. My biological sciences training did not prepare me to try to understand the landscapes from a local person's perspective, or to appreciate their/our knowledge beyond a field assistant's value. I was taught instead to observe 'objectively,' and I therefore missed many opportunities to truly learn and understand the struggles of rural Iban communities and the decisions they have to make.

Of all the people I had talked and interacted with, Apai was the person who took most interest in my research, and he took it upon himself to provide me a thorough education of what it means to be Iban. I became his 'adoptive daughter,' which meant that, whenever I was not working on the farm, I had to take up the gender role of washing his clothes, cleaning up in the kitchen, and serving drinks to male visitors, including tourist guides, despite some of my initial inner resistance. While my father was also Dayak (Bidayuh) and from a village in rural Sarawak, he had never raised his children in fixed gender roles. However, as time passed, I understood that these roles were significant and important to the Iban community, to convey respect and responsibility for being adopted into the community. My adoptive parents would have never asked or assumed the same responsibilities from visiting tourist guides or female guests. I understood that it was also an honour to be truly considered as part of the family by doing daily chores as expected from one of their daughters.

This obligation continued when I returned to Kuching to care for my mother and was expected to keep in touch with my adoptive parents, informing them of my activities. From my adoptive parents' perspective, I had a lot to learn as a daughter, but they had also several times voiced their appreciation that I was not 'snobbish' and that I did everything that they asked of me, willingly. In turn, my

ethnographic responsibility was to make sense of what I saw and was told, and to recount their stories with as much care and respect as possible.¹⁷ Relational accountability that requires reciprocal and respectful relationships within the communities where I am conducting research is an important aspect of ethical Indigenous research.¹⁸

Ethnographic research has been rightfully criticised as a form of knowledge extraction and domination.¹⁹ As a Dayak Bidayuh scholar who was born and raised in an ancestral yet urban environment and with my current connections to a western institution of higher learning, I try to be mindful of how my privilege affects the fieldwork that I do. It is my family connection, as the daughter of a prominent Dayak, that accords me some ease, familiarity and respect with the Iban communities in Sarawak, but also places me in a more considered position. While I aimed to have more counterparts and co-theorists within the communities I had worked with, rather than “othering the subjects,”²⁰ I was still cognisant that I simultaneously hold dual identities with varying privileges as a Bidayuh researcher from a prestigious university. I was ‘one of us,’ but also separate, being identified as an urbanite and being Bidayuh. Smith further describes the complex set of ‘insider’ dynamics that Indigenous researchers have to work through, where assumed advantages also belie hidden challenges, and higher expectations and communal responsibilities.²¹

I could never leave the ‘field,’ for I am as much a part of the field as my interlocutors are. Reflecting on my own identity as a Bidayuh is part of the research. I am reminded of this whenever I am in a western academic setting and am questioned about my views of home, akin to a travelling informant. For the Indigenous scholar, there appears to be no separation between studying Indigenous communities and being studied ourselves. But perhaps by taking the reins and remembering our collective memories, Dayak scholars could begin to re-imagine possible futures beyond what has been documented in literature and taken as truth.

The following section guides and shapes the discussion on *refusal* and *survivance* through remembering. I offer a contextual analysis of the taxation of the Dayak population in Sarawak during the pre-Independence era while highlighting the physical taxation of the population by the Brunei Sultan and Brooke

¹⁷ Wolf 1992.

¹⁸ Wilson 2008, 40.

¹⁹ Said 1978; Wolf 1992; Smith 2013.

²⁰ Lassiter 2005; Marcus 1998.

²¹ Smith 2013.

dynasty that relate to the previous stories. Many Dayaks had resisted paying taxes to the Sultan of Brunei and also refused to recognise his successor, James Brooke, as legitimate ruler of Sarawak. In doing so, the resisting Dayaks were constantly raided by other Dayaks (the ‘government’ Dayaks) at the orders of James Brooke, with whom they were aligned.

Taxing the Dayaks: Centring Indigenous *Refusal* and *Survivance*

The Bidayus and Ibans had shared similar frictions with the Brunei tax collectors. In Iban oral literature spanning about two to four generations before the arrival of James Brooke in Sarawak, and which continues to the present day, the defiance against the tax collectors of the Sultan of Brunei is well-documented. The complex pattern of involvement between Ibans, local Malays, and the “distant, weak, but still prestigious Sultanate”²² is described by Iban scholar, Benedict Sandin²³ in his book on *The Sea Dayaks of Borneo: Before White Rajah Rule*. Prior to Brooke’s tenure, natural resources in the form of rice harvest, were extracted as pupu tahun (or yearly tax) from the Dayaks and other local communities on the authority of the Sultan of Brunei. The tax collectors were Malay chiefs who were also suspected of collecting for their own wealth. The local communities were taxed annually regardless of the quality of the harvest, and there was growing resentment towards a Sultan who relied on his prestige, and on Malay chiefs to do his bidding. The tax collectors would collect the padi or rice tax, in a special rattan basket called mungut, which in theory would hold one pasu (jar) of padi, the yearly amount required from each Dayak family. However, the construction of the mungut was flexible enough to hold more than the required jar of padi. Angered by this attempt to cheat, the Dayak leaders, notably Luta of Entanak and Ugat of Paku, as described in tusut, frequently slashed the mungut with their parangs.²⁴ The misuse of the mungut carried on into the Brooke era as well. As described in my dad’s story, this anger towards the attempted cheating would sometimes result in the bloody demise of the tax collectors. These rebellious acti-

²² Sandin 1967, 60.

²³ Sandin spoke particularly about Iban works published by “English authors” and it was his desire to present an “Iban side to the story which has not yet been fully told.” Sandin 1967, 60.

²⁴ Sandin 1967.

vities were reported to the Brunei authorities as a form of ‘misconduct,’ and thus there were acts of retaliation against the recalcitrant Dayaks.

My father’s story was not about an impetuous act of rebellion, decided upon a whim. Rather, it spoke of an act of careful consideration at a time of hunger and declining harvest. They could no longer provide enough rice for the hungry Malay tax-collectors and for the Sultan while feeding their own families at the same time. Exposing the cheating tax collectors was a collective act of refusal, and my ancestors felt they also had to put an end to the tax collectors’ cheating. After facing retaliation by forces aligned with the Sultan of Brunei, the next step was to replace him with the Sultan of their choosing.

While the idea of embracing a ‘white saviour’ to displace a distant Sultan did not sit well with me, my father’s story reminded me of the agency and bravery of my ancestors. The Dayaks²⁵ had refused one (self-imposed) ruler for a strange other, and hopefully someone from whom they would get greater political mileage. Vizenor reminds us that Indigenous survivance stories are renunciations of tragedy and victimry, and such narratives are employed as a means of continuation.²⁶

This survivance story contrasts greatly with the mainstream narrative that the Sultan of Brunei had asked James Brooke for help and that Brooke decided to assist him out of pity for the Dayak population.²⁷ That is to say, the mainstream narrative presents the Dayaks as negligible in their effect or importance to the narrative other than asking for help or causing rebellions against the ruling elite. Others have pointed out less altruistic reasons for why James Brooke decided to take over Sarawak, namely, to extend and support British control of trade routes.²⁸ Further accounts also point out that the handover of Sarawak was not as benign as popularly imagined – that James Brooke “wrestled the governorship of the Sarawak River district (‘Sarawak Proper’) from Brunei in 1841.”²⁹ In my father’s story, the identity of the person replacing the Sultan of Brunei didn’t matter as much as the agency and acts of refusal by our ancestors.

Together with Apai’s story, this *remembering* demonstrates that continued, overlapping resistance towards a succession of foreign rulers is an act of *survivance* and a way of life that nourishes Indigenous ways of knowing.³⁰ Dayaks

25 Not all Dayaks were welcoming of the White Rajah rule however, as depicted in Apai’s story.

26 Vizenor 1999.

27 I have observed many such re-tellings by tourist guides to European tourists in Batang Ai; presumably to also flatter tourists, as that was the outcome.

28 Tarling 1982; Walker 2002.

29 Cramb 2007, 114.

30 Vizenor 1999.

have not left, but instead have persisted and thrived in Sarawak until the present day, while formerly reigning dynasties have all but lost political influence.

The following section further discusses how dominant *remembering* through anthropological literature disguises the extent of colonial violence towards the Dayaks, particularly through the selective usage of certain terms to describe the so-called ‘plundering.’ As such, the Nabau dream as told by Apai, could be described as part of an Indigenous *refusa*³¹ to contest dominant narratives and to provide an alternate *remembering* that holds true for Ibans.

Raids, Expeditions and the Nabau Dream

Indigenous decolonial scholarship increasingly sheds light on normative attempts to depict a linear and stable account of colonial conquest, settlement and civilisation. Here, I draw upon European accounts, which is another (dominant) form of *remembering* or, in Vizenor’s words, the “literature of dominance, narratives of discoveries, translations, cultural studies, and prescribed names of time, place and person”³² of the expeditions and raids during the Brooke era to provide a cursory overview of bias towards acts of resistance from Ibans. I turn to the refusal of the Ulu Ai’³³ Ibans towards Brooke’s Sarawak to stop “raids”³⁴ and pay door taxes.³⁵ When examined through a decolonial geographical reading, European renderings of expeditions and raids in Sarawak are revealed as tales of romantic conquest by white British colonials.

The terms ‘expedition’ and ‘raid’ are used interchangeably in the anthropological literature about Sarawak; although both described very similar activities, such as plundering and burning down longhouses, slashing rice fields and occasionally taking heads. The former usually refers to raids conducted by the Sarawak government, namely under Brooke dynasty rule. Therefore, expeditions are justified upon moral and ethical grounds of colonial boundary-marking, while ‘raids’ are not. Yet, in 1843, two years after Brooke had occupied the governorship of Sarawak, with the help of British marines, Iban and Malay forces, Brooke attacked and occupied fortified Iban territories, “plundered and burned

31 Simpson 2014.

32 Vizenor 1999, 52.

33 Ulu Ai’ covers a wide landscape in southern-eastern Sarawak, that includes Batang Ai.

34 Quote marks my own and henceforth in rest of article, to depict bias against attacks by the Brooke-ruling forces, vs those who opposed Brooke.

35 See Pringle 1970; Wadley 2004.

surrounding longhouses, and extracted a promise of submission,” driving the Ibans further into the Rejang.³⁶ Brooke’s expeditions were as violent as the raids of which the resisting Ibans were accused.

Since 1868, there were many expeditions against the resisting Ulu Ai’ Ibans who, under Iban leader Ngumbang, refused to pay taxes. Similarly, at the nearby Dutch-controlled border, the Ulu Ai’ Ibans were under siege by the Dutch-aligned forces. These expeditions would claim the lives of 10,000 to 12,000 men taken from purportedly ‘pacified’ areas of Sarawak – the 9 March, 1886 raid against the Ulu Ai’ Ibans is well documented in European literature as the Kedang Expedition.³⁷ Sixteen years later, the Brooke-aligned forces of ‘government’ Ibans, consisting of about 12,000 people assembled in 815 boats, conducted another raid against the Ulu Ai’ Ibans. However, thousands were taken ill due to a cholera outbreak, and as many as a thousand Ibans may have died.³⁸

Rememberings on Native Refusal for Logged Lands

For many, for whom Indigenous resistance towards the White Rajahs has been mostly relegated to the footnotes, if any, of Malaysian national textbooks and tourism texts, and mostly wiped out of public consciousness, the above narrative may seem like impractical remembering. What does it have to do with the current difficult dilemmas over the conservation of native lands and more-than-humans? Yet, if we are to think deeply about place and relations to land and place, we must also think deeply about previous colonisation and land-based power relationships between Indigenous and local populations and the coloniser, and how these are the foundation of the dominant epistemological conservation-thinking that is reproduced in postcolonial times. In other words, we must think about Native *survance* and other forms of placed-based resistance to erasure, including *refusal*, that allow one to survive and maintain presence and relations in places that counter dominant cultural narratives. Here, *survance* can refer to also remembering other histories of being and knowing.

From these dominant European rememberings/accounts, I now return to Apai’s remembering of the Nabau that had helped his ancestors keep not just their land-based territories, but also their bodies of water. “Jangan ingat sendiri

³⁶ Boyle 1865, 291–313; Pringle 1970, 74–74; Walker 2002, 70–74 in Cramb 2007, 114.

³⁷ Wadley 2004.

³⁸ Baring-Gould and Bampfylde 1889 [1909], 388–9; Pringle 1970, 225–6 in Wadley 2004.

saja,” Apai reminded me after recounting his story, as handed down from his grandfathers. “Don’t just think about yourself. You have to think about the next generation, inheriting the lands.” There are no more places to be buried, except back in your ancestral lands, as I was told. “Where will his grandchildren go? How will they live?” These were the worries that he shared with me. Apai then brought me back to the present day, where I had arrived in a time when the community (consisting mostly of elders) was fighting loggers who had snuck in several times with their logging equipment and were logging what was left of the customary native primary forests: the communities’ pulau galau. This was my first (re)introduction to the landscapes of Batang Ai through Apai’s guidance. En route to their territories, on a speeding longboat from the dam site,³⁹ Apai stopped the engine and pointed to a far distance: a faint jarring brown strip amongst the green hills. “They took our trees,” he said in Iban. Later, he took me to a hill where we could see many kilometres away, logged hill-tops. “We could hear the chainsaws from a far distance,” he added in Iban, “but we were too late to stop them.”



Figure 1: Printed photos from a camera-phone of the elders reclaiming lands from illegal loggers.

About a year before I had arrived, the elders, armed with parangs and old shotguns, went on a half-day hike through the hills, and attempted to confront the loggers, who fled upon first sight. With the help of a younger community member who had a cell phone, they took photos of the felled trees and logging equipment as part of their evidence, and their triumphant (if brief) reclamation of their lands

³⁹ Part of Batang Ai was converted into a concrete-face rock-fill hydroelectric power dam site in 1985, and had displaced about 3000 people from 26 longhouses since.

(see Figure 1). Despite many reports to the local police station and the state forest department, Apai lived in some fear that the loggers would retaliate, and was cautious whenever he had to go to the nearest township to obtain supplies. This act of continued resistance against outsiders attempting to encroach on their territories reflects inspiring strength and local protection of territories, yet these are not the stories that are recounted to tourists, perhaps because stories of rebellion against the White Rajah do not fit into the perceived tropical romance created for tourists. These poses of silence are never natural. A local reporter had taken interest in the resistance, and it was written up in the local media. Apai showed me the carefully clipped, laminated pieces with pride (see Figure 2). However, despite the vast remote distance and access-difficulty, these forests remain vulnerable for exploitation by the most determined loggers.

Apai explained why he fights hard to secure his community's territories, for about eight generations at least have lived on these very lands that I am visiting. The hope was that his grandchildren would inherit and continue to connect with the lands, just as he and his forefathers did, with grace from the Nabau – lands that are cultivated with rice, and other smallholder farms, lands that remain wild, and lands that were laid to waste by loggers.



Figure 2: Apai's laminated press article, highlighting the illegal logging on their native customary lands.

It had struck me that, in Apai's remembering of the Nabau story, there was no sense of shame or regret associated with fighting against the Brooke army. If the Brookes were 'well-loved' by the local population in Sarawak, as many Brooke supporters would claim, they were just as much resisted, and their claims to rule Iban and other territories were refused legitimacy.⁴⁰ The wider spiritual and polit-

⁴⁰ There were three well-known major rebellions (Rentap in 1853; Liu Shan Bang in 1857; Syarif Masahor in 1860) against the Brooke administration.

ical conjunctures of the Nabau assisting the Ibans were part of the refusal's symbolic significance.

Survivance through acts of remembering continues until present day. Today, in all three Batang Ai communities I visited, the Nabau still exists in various ways in the stories told, and also in rocky outcrops of particular sections of the river. During my days as a conservation field-worker, I was singularly obsessed with orang utans, forever scanning the treetops for their nests, even when I was no longer doing nest count surveys. I would scan for nests as we drifted down the river in a longboat, heading back to camp. This time around, I allowed myself to be open to all senses, and to be guided by the conversations. In the silence of drifting down the river, my interlocutors proffered in an almost reverent tone: "This is where the Nabau lives, this is where the Nabau fishes, this is where our ancestors first saw the Nabau." It is my feeling that the Nabau is often mentioned more respectfully by my Iban interlocutors than, say, the orang utan. These rememberings also demonstrate how place and space are intimately connected to history and ideas of identity.⁴¹ But also, places, according to Indigenous worldviews, have agency and are relational.⁴²

These landscapes are rich with stories of resistance, persistence and triumph. Seeing the land through the eyes of a former conservationist, and of someone beginning to unravel the complexities of what it means to be Bidayuh in a contemporary era, I began to remember Batang Ai as more than just a conservation landscape created for orang utans that we had to save from the people living on the lands. Place is not meant to be an object of study⁴³ or to be acted upon. I had to relearn place's responsibilities and obligations, and stay connected with place while acknowledging the differential relations and duties this entails.⁴⁴ Previously rigid concepts and narratives about landscapes and biodiversity were being pushed out, not unlike how my ancestors pushed off cheating tax-collectors of the baruk. I could hear and see place. These stories of rebellion, in turn, are heard and seen by the communities and place to which these stories co-exist with.

In the next section, I tend to the different dynamics of remembering, which sometimes lead to *contra-remembering*, particularly in normative narratives. I also point to the strategic and selective use of remembering the Brooke legacy by Indigenous land-rights activists. The following section therefore discusses the

⁴¹ Basso 1996; Nazarea 2006.

⁴² Larsen and Johnson 2017.

⁴³ Daigle 2016.

⁴⁴ Bawaka Country 2018.

political impact of the different types of remembering in relation to land – not just decolonial remembering but the different rememberings by different people.

Contra-remembering the Brookes: Landscape, Resilience, and Memory

Within the conservation and control thesis of political ecology, local and Indigenous peoples have been deprived of access to lands and other natural resources, and have lost the ability to conserve species and areas through their customary laws and ways. Further, where local practices have historically been productive and relatively benign, such practices have been characterised as unsustainable by the state and other parties in conflicts over the control of resources.⁴⁵ In contrast, colonial-era land management practices are often remembered as positive interventions. Here, I tend to the political ecology strands of such *contra-remembering*. Tuck and Yang remind us that colonisation has been reinforced by the theft of land and place, and with it, the underpinning idea that colonials were better land managers.⁴⁶ In Sarawak, there appears to be a historical nostalgia for the Brooke era, where it is perceived that the Brookes were better caretakers of native customary rights compared to the current state government. Part of this nostalgic revival includes a Hollywood movie production about James Brooke, with the help of a descendant and current heir of the Brooke family.⁴⁷ A *Guardian* article highlights a quote from an Iban land-rights activist:

Many people in the longhouses say they yearn for the days of the white rajahs, who established village boundaries that included most of the areas that communities claim today as their traditional land. Many have ancient pictures of the Brookes on their walls. “The British colonial authorities recognised the Dayak land rights,” said Nicholas Mujah, a former senior civil servant who now gives evidence in court for communities making land claims, emphasising the long-standing nature of their customary land rights. But after independence, the new government began to claim that all forestland belonged to the state.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Biersack 2006; Robbins 2011; Wolf 1972.

⁴⁶ Tuck and Yang 2012.

⁴⁷ See <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/entertainment/2017/07/06/white-rajah-malaysias-first-hollywood-epic-film/>, accessed July 27, 2022.

⁴⁸ See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/mar/24/in-malaysia-how-protecting-native-forests-cost-an-activist-his-life>, accessed July 27, 2022.

This idea that the British colonial authorities through the Brookes had cared more for customary land rights and for forests, compared to post-colonial rule, clashes with the historical fact that European-inherited land legislations such as assumption of state proprietorship in land, the requirement to utilise land to justify continuing tenure, and the misinterpretation of unoccupied or unutilised land as ‘idle’ or ‘waste’ land, was introduced in Sarawak in the beginning of the Brooke period and continued into British colonial times between 1945 and 1963. Throughout the Brooke period, misunderstandings of and prejudice against shifting cultivation and communal longhouse tenure, influenced confusing and contradictory approaches to land law and administration in Sarawak.⁴⁹ Similarly, following British colonial examples in Malaya, land development by migrants was encouraged through an 1876 proclamation for grants of land for 99 years at a “nominal rent” to Chinese pepper and gambier planters.⁵⁰ These and other land legislations slowly eroded native customary rights, whereupon, based on the assumption of state proprietorship of all land, natives themselves were considered to be squatters on their own lands. This perception that the British were somehow respectful of holders of native customary rights has carried into present day. After independence, recognition of customary access has been increasingly restricted, with rights and entitlements being decided upon by the state.

While there is much well-deserved critique of postcolonial state development in Sarawak, as pointed out by Malaysian academic Fadzilah Majid Cooke, the Brooke land legislation and law legacy resulted in “serious repercussions in local access and native customary management regimes, and this still has not been questioned today.”⁵¹ It is important to note that colonisation is also understood as an ongoing structure.⁵² One might ask, why is it easier to criticise postcolonial development than to question the roots of the slow erosion of native customary rights in Sarawak? Why do some Dayaks look upon colonial rulers with an apparent rosy tinge of nostalgia? While understanding that colonisation continues in present day, it is also vital to acknowledge Indigenous ways of *survival*.⁵³ This added layer of complexity suggests subtle Indigenous refusal of what it means to live in this contemporary era.

⁴⁹ Cramb 2007.

⁵⁰ Porter 1967, 38–39 in Cramb 2007, 128.

⁵¹ Cooke 2006, 27.

⁵² Wolfe 2006.

⁵³ Vizenor 1994.

Contra-remembering the Brooke Legacy

Contra-remembering is a decolonial political act that suggests distinct, non-confrontational modes of agency. Post-independence, some Indigenous activists may bring up the Brooke era more favourably than is justified. However, understanding the way some Dayaks collectively remember the past requires looking beyond the stereotype of poor oppressed Dayaks needing an outside saviour, and reading ambiguity and complexity in different strategies and motivations.

Indigenous activists may perhaps invoke Brooke in a positive light, but only to counteract the state's development plans on native customary lands. This *contra-remembering* is not to ask for a Brooke descendant to return and rule over Sarawak once more, but rather a call to remind Dayak politicians and elite of their failed collective responsibility to look after their less-advantaged kindred and native customary lands.⁵⁴

Contra-remembering the Brooke legacy could therefore be seen as a strategy to shame local Dayak/Malaysian politicians for neglecting native customary rights. This tactic may resemble a subtler strategy of *refusal*.⁵⁵ In particular, Simpson's work on Kahnawà:ke Mohawk refusals as both stance and theory of the political, reveals acts of concealment and refusal as legitimate decolonial responses to colonial processes.⁵⁶ In other words, *refusal* is the revenge of the consent.⁵⁷ Similarly, Cepek's work on outward acts of consensus and cooperation concealing the persistence of critical consciousness and internal debate is useful to this work.⁵⁸ Where Brooke nostalgia has been useful to tourism and as a state political countermeasure to remind the federal government of our unique and separate history, *contra-remembering* the Brooke legacy could be seen as part of a complex strategy to keep the native customary rights debate wrenched open.

There is a danger of non-Indigenous Asians and/or Westerners (mis)reading the *contra-remembering* of the Brooke legacy as an invitation to step in, and become self-appointed leaders in native customary rights campaigns or to speak for Sarawak natives on international platforms, thus further endangering the land-rights debate, and the Dayak identity to remain simplistic and reductive. The idea of Indigenous identity that is fixed in imaginaries of savourism must be

⁵⁴ Mujah, pers. comms., 2016. Nicholas Mujah who was quoted by the *Guardian*, later clarified his remarks to me.

⁵⁵ As articulated in different formations by Li 1999; Scott 2008; Simpson 2014.

⁵⁶ Simpson 2014.

⁵⁷ McGranahan 2016.

⁵⁸ Cepek 2011; Cepek 2016.

disrupted. Is it possible to hold to this *contra-remembering* while also remembering the efforts and victories of resisting Dayaks? The remembering of my father's and Apai's stories is hence an attempt to remind ourselves of resistance and the current survivance of Dayaks today.

Towards a Framework of *Political Ecology of Remembering*

As a way of attending to the specificities of Indigenous approaches to conservation practices, I turn to decolonising methods. More specifically, analysing how Indigenous stories of survivance and refusal connect back or relate to conservation landscapes or places constitutes a *political ecology of remembering* approach. Place, as an analytical and methodological location, challenges coloniality and its present-day manifestations. *Contra-remembering* as method and practice presents a particular frame for attending to Indigenous peoples' engagement with conservation practices. For instance, in the context of Borneo (and therefore, Sarawak), customary rights are contested and rural communities are depicted as threats to biodiversity.⁵⁹ Further, Scott's work on resistance⁶⁰ has influenced the extent to which local people, despite marginalisation, are recognised as playing an important role in the success of conservation policies.⁶¹ I build on this work by considering a decolonial remembering approach. Within this decolonial framing, I consider Osterhould's political ecology of memory framework.⁶² The theoretical intervention that I offer is a re-imagination of *remembering*, or *contra-remembering*, as opposed to the general idea of memory.

Indigenous pain, and the failure to uphold static romantic identities of the Indigenous past are often noted in the conservation discourse.⁶³ While many of these narratives are rooted in reality, and contribute to the political ecology framework, these painful histories do not fully constitute what it means to be Indigenous in the contemporary era. Indigenous peoples are vulnerable to not

⁵⁹ Clearly 2008; Colchester 1993; Eghenter et al. 2003a; Eghenter et al. 2003b; Eghenter and Labo 2003; Eghenter 2006; Peluso 1992.

⁶⁰ Scott 1990; Scott 2008.

⁶¹ Agrawal and Ostrom 2006.

⁶² Osterhould 2016.

⁶³ Berkes 2012; Brantlinger 2003; Brockington et al. 2012.

just the dispossession of lands, but also of dispossession of narratives/stories, particularly the remembering of survivance and political consciousness.

What does this mean in terms of conservation practices? When Indigenous peoples are dispossessed of their stories of agency, colonial refusal, and political strategies, they are locked into narratives of victimry, which further denies them access to the conservation of lands and biodiversity. My working understanding of *remembering* emerges primarily from Indigenous scholars' notion of storytelling. Stories are how Indigenous peoples define and redefine their/our sovereignty, spaces, cultures and knowledge. Storytelling (through collective memories) reclaims "epistemic ground that was erased by colonialism" and also "lays a framework and foundation for the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty and the reclamation of material ground."⁶⁴ Remembering stories of *survivance* and colonial *refusal* brings the history of colonialism and its present-day consequences back into the discourse of Indigenous customary rights and conservation, as well as disrupting how we structure the present.

What further imaginative possibilities are there for a future that goes beyond occupying a framework that continues to patronise rural Dayak communities, whether to "save conservation landscapes" or to develop rural landscapes? How do we recognise and respect that Dayaks ourselves change, adapt, acquire new skills and desires, and yearn to return home to the land? In examining Indigenous oral narratives as methodologies for decolonisation, Baldy suggests that "Indigenous oral narratives were developed as living histories and were understood not only as documents of the past, but also living philosophies of the present and future."⁶⁵ Million further argues that orally based communal "[knowledge] systems are theory, since they posit a proposition and a paradigm on how the world works... Story is Indigenous theory."⁶⁶

Similarly, I suggest that including the remembering of stories of *survivance* and *refusal* in ethnographic methodology would uncover further hidden power relations and the multiple strategies that Indigenous peoples undertake, as well as their aspirations. Yet this attending to *remembering* is not meant to be a "discovery narrative."⁶⁷ This methodological approach is a practice in listening and feeling for lesser heard, at-times misunderstood stories. Rearticulating these stories speaks back to the politics around land development and conservation today. The Iban farmers in Batang Ai continually battle with competing interests

⁶⁴ Sium and Ritkes 2013, III.

⁶⁵ Baldy 2015, 18.

⁶⁶ Million 2014, 35.

⁶⁷ See Rubis and Theriault 2020; Todd 2019.

on their lands, including those of conservation, ecotourism and logging. They have to constantly negotiate with, cope with and welcome, with seemingly open arms, more powerful players, such as forestry personnel, ecotourism guides, tourists, conservationists and researchers who often drop by. Li (2014), Nadasdy (2003; 2007), Ribot & Peluso (2003), West (2006) and many others note the many inequalities embedded in power relations and cultural differences that impede effective co-management in conservation landscapes in Borneo and elsewhere. I build on this work by rethinking *remembering*, or *contra-remembering*, as part of a decolonial political ecology approach. As such, Apai and other community members, and Indigenous activists either hide their protocols,⁶⁸ tend to narratives of *contra-remembering*, or at times, refuse, either in outright defiance or through other subtle strategies.⁶⁹

I offer the following questions for consideration when designing conservation or sustainable development frameworks: how may *remembering* Indigenous stories of survivance and refusal offer alternative approaches to the study of conservation landscapes? How might *remembering* impact the ability of local policy-makers to craft more effective and people-friendly conservation governance policies? How do we begin to understand and respect the different approaches and strategies of Indigenous communities and individuals/activists, while insisting that they cannot be perfect representations of Indigenous identity, and that their ‘imperfection’ should not be used to justify the imposition of policies or programmes designed without their consent or input? In attending to place, we need to stay within the perplexity of coexistence and take up such challenges in place-based, ethical ways.⁷⁰

Therefore, when thinking about decolonisation that is processual and relational, and a *political ecology of remembering*, where Indigenous peoples’ *survivance* and agency is centred, we can begin to re-imagine more collaborative forms of conservation that meaningfully account for local Indigenous knowledge and ways of nurturing land and relationships.

68 Rubis and Theriault 2018.

69 Li 1999; Scott 1990; Simpson 2014.

70 TallBear 2014.

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