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Durian diplomacies

Making liveable futures in a drowned Bornean landscape

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Traduction(s) :

La diplomatie du durian

Résumé

What happens to a village when its material foundations are destroyed and its new incarnation is refused recognition by the state? This narrative explores the diplomatic strategies through which a recently displaced Bornean community has sought to create a liveable future in its new site above a dam, by reaching beyond the state to set up relations and alliances with non-state players. Drawing on long-term research, I trace how the villagers have used various nonhuman entities as ambassadors and material bridges that both represent their new village and extend its capacity to engage with the rest of the world. Importantly, however, such diplomatic processes are also helping to constitute their new home's contours and identity, allowing them—in conversation with others—to figure out what the new village is and could be.

Entrées d'index

Keyword : Borneo, Bidayuh, displacement, more-than-human diplomacy, experimental future

Texte intégral

- 1 Stocky banana plants, sun-dappled and swishing in the warm breeze, lined one side of the narrow path along which we descended. On the other side: young durian trees rising tentatively from the sloping earth, their slim, waxy leaves fanning out in all directions. Now and again, Roy would pause to point out which durian tree was “local” and which was “Musang King”—a prized and increasingly pricey strain of this spiky fruit that’s highly sought after by town-dwellers and a burgeoning new Chinese market. Four years ago, he and his fellow villagers—indigenous Bidayus living in the forested hills of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo—had planted about a hundred Musang King trees in carefully calibrated rows along this steep hillslope. The initial outlay came from an entrepreneurial Malaysian Chinese *towkay* (business owner), who hoped to later sell the fruit for a good price. Of course, Roy explained, the durians would get a lot bigger if the trees were given fertilizer, but this *towkay* wanted them to be “organic”—smaller, more flavoursome, more lucrative.
- 2 As the slope levelled out, we turned right, emerging at a sheltered clearing ringed with mature bamboos and banana trees. The site felt and smelled inexplicably familiar, its stillness and cocoon-like humidity transporting me back to fieldwork I’d conducted a decade ago. “This is our durian nursery,” explained Roy, gesturing to over two hundred saplings in pots, clustered together under roughly fashioned netted shelters. “They’re all local—not yet married (*bayuh kahwin*, i.e. grafted) to the Musang King. But when they are, they’ll become Musang Kings too.” The three of us sat together on the *tanju* (raised bamboo platform), taking in the breeze. “This is also where the school was,” said Roy’s sister, Nyang, breaking the silence. “But you can’t tell—everything’s overgrown now.”
- 3 Mental and sensory memory suddenly working in tandem, I now realized why this place seemed familiar. There, beyond rustling bamboos, was a view of the hills that I’d seen many times, while hanging around what was once the village primary school—a pretty cluster of raised wooden buildings next to a large, flat playing field (which doubled up as a helicopter landing site for the flying doctors and occasional politician). There, too, was the distinctive “scar” in the hills that overlooked the village, which I used to orientate myself when walking in the area *sans* maps, GPS, or mobile phone reception. But below all that, not far from where we sat, there was only still, stagnant water—the far reaches of a new reservoir that had submerged most of Roy and Nyang’s old village. Protruding above its surface was a silvery-grey dead zone—the tops of once-tall trees and other plants that had drowned as the waters rose, but had yet to fall over.
- 4 In the mid-2000s, four small Bidayuh villages were earmarked for resettlement as part of a dam-construction scheme designed to boost the capital city’s water supply. The 1,000-odd residents of the affected communities were told to leave their homes, lands, and crops—all located in the hills without road access—and move down to a government-built township, replete with modern concrete houses, piped water, grid electricity, schools, and clinics. Intrinsic to this move was a shift in livelihood: this, said politicians and civil servants, was the villagers’ chance to give up their backward subsistence rice-planting ways and to earn wages, be properly educated, and become productive, modern citizens. Many villagers jumped at the opportunity; others felt more ambivalent but moved anyway, especially since the two small village schools were going to be closed and shifted to the resettlement site.
- 5 However, about thirty households, Roy and Nyang’s among them, undertook a long, fraught legal struggle to avoid leaving the hills by obtaining recognition of their customary land rights further uphill, above the dam’s projected inundation zone. It was here that they built their new village from scratch, without the state’s consent, using their own trees and salvaged bits of their old houses. The legal case ran for several years, earning them both admiration and opprobrium, and a local reputation as “the group that’s fighting the government”. In 2014, defying expectations, the group won their case, legally obliging the government to acknowledge the villagers’ land rights above the dam.

6 Despite this legal victory, the government remains opposed to the villagers' continued residence in the area. Driven by a modernizing, developmentalist vision, the Sarawakian state has little conceptual room for a village like this: built above a major development project, yet revolving around subsistence agriculture, eschewing the modern amenities and perks of development offered by the resettlement township. Today, the new village still lacks official recognition, state funding and subsidies, amenities, and infrastructure. The school and chapel have gone, and disintegrating solar panels and water pipes (once provided by the state and brought up from the old village) have not been replaced. Politicians and civil servants continue issuing pleas to the villagers to move to the resettlement site for their own good. But most of the residents have stayed, determined to make a new life in their watery abode.

7 Lacking recognition and resources from the state, how does a small new village survive? What challenges of liveability does it face in a world that's constitutively configured to nullify its existence? And what becomes of a village when its material moorings are destroyed—in this case, swallowed by the waters of the dam?

8 In this narrative, I explore one of the villagers' main responses to their predicament: undertaking forms of diplomacy that reach beyond the state to obtain what (they say) the state should but doesn't give them. Their efforts entail making representations to and building relations with non-state others, whose interest and support can be marshalled to stabilize the new village's existence. While these diplomatic practices are conducted by humans—particularly Roy and Nyang's family, which played a leading role in the lawsuit—they are indelibly shaped by (and would be impossible without) various nonhuman entities, including durians, hydro-electric turbines, and the local landscape. These entities play critical mediatory roles, both representing the villagers and extending their capacity to engage with the rest of the world. In the process, they also enmesh the new village in a multitude of imaginaries that are, in turn, (re)shaping its collective identity and sense of place in the world.

9 Consider the young durian trees, ripe not with fruit (yet), but with the promise of income—for clothes, medicines, education, village amenities, further cash-generating projects. The durian *towkay* was introduced to the villagers by their lawyer, who continues to act as their go-between. All being well, the village will soon be exporting organic, high-grade durians to the rest of Malaysia, Southeast Asia, and China, finally reaping some deferred profits. In this network, durians (real, imagined, potential) take centre-stage as mobile ambassadors that traverse different imaginaries and regimes of value.¹ To sustain the *towkay's* interest and investment, the villagers must keep sending physical samples and photographic evidence of the trees' growth—demonstrations of their fruity potential that justify his initial outlay. And when finally harvested, the fruit will be cast into the world (via the *towkay*) as Musang Kings, thus entering a lucrative transnational epicurean network that prizes durians' flavour and texture. The fruits' assumed quality, however, will be guaranteed by another imaginary: that of the remote indigenous hill village where trees are tended organically and by hand, making for small but superior harvests.

10 Durians thus serve as “spatio-temporally detached fragment[s]” (as Gell describes ambassadors)² of the new village that, as they travel, open up and mediate relations that the (human) villagers could not generate on their own. By contrast, another nonhuman entity—the freshly formed water-scape surrounding the village—mediates relations simply by being there. In recent years, the villagers have styled the reservoir and (now oddly truncated) hills above it as a natural paradise in order to build up an eco-tourism venture. Taking advantage of the new village's improved mobile reception and comparative ease of access (via boat rather than a four-hour jungle trek), they have populated Facebook³ and some travel agents' websites with alluring images of the water, waterfalls, sunrises, and lush jungles, together with shots of tourists relaxing on open verandas, crossing bamboo bridges, enjoying local food and drink. They have also built a beautiful new guest house on a mound overlooking the village and reservoir, replete with a water tank and seat toilet. Not unlike an embassy, the guest house acts as a relatively safe contact zone, where tourists can enjoy the breezes, views, and decent(ish) mobile phone coverage without the everyday discomforts of water shortages or regular squat toilets. The new water-scape thus plays an *in-situ* ambassadorial role,

representing and marketing the village to the rest of the world. As images of the reservoir and hills circulate, they feed into a larger, globally recognizable eco-tourist aesthetic—one that evacuates historical and political specificities and replaces them with generic ideals about pristine nature and indigenous traditions. Like durians, this water-scape is consumed both as it is and as a fictive ideal. And like durians, it is helping to lay the economic grounds for the new village's survival by generating a reasonably regular source of income and thus security.

11 Supplementing these efforts is a third kind of diplomacy that does not directly involve income-generation. This is a mode of alliance-making that pre-dates the dam, reaching back to the “era of the British” (*jaman British*, i.e. the colonial era), when indigenous communities would petition the state for, and be “given” (*nyen*), good things and small measures of progress (*kemajuan*), such as trade goods, cash cropping opportunities, healthcare, and education.⁴ After independence, much of this benevolent work was taken over by non-state bodies, particularly charitable and religious organizations. Before resettlement, for example, the four villages regularly received clothes, medicines, and dental treatment from the Sathya Sai Baba Council and funds for the village chapel and Christian activities from Anglican and evangelical church groups. These relations were disrupted by the dam and resettlement, but have been revived and extended in recent years by Roy, Nyang, and the other villagers.

12 Capitalizing on these older engagements, the villagers have once again reached out to sympathetic individuals and organizations in order to obtain basic amenities for the new site. Today, their electricity comes from a micro-hydro generator provided by a Malaysian grassroots organization. The new village chapel is being constructed piecemeal through donations from a charismatic church, Sathya Sai Baba, a local politician, and other supporters—including a US university branch of Engineers Without Borders, which, for its summer project, helped with the building and brought solar panels for its roof. To maintain these connections, the villagers must practise a different genre of diplomacy—that of the needy, the disempowered—styling themselves less as capable durian-cultivators than as marginalized people who are neglected by the state. Here, mini-turbines, water pipes, chapel buildings, solar panels, and so forth serve not as ambassadors but as material mediators of a fundamentally humanitarian relationship between sympathetic benefactors and their beneficiaries.

13 For younger villagers like Roy and Nyang, who are not keen to carry on with subsistence agriculture but do not want to move, non-state diplomacies open up vital possibilities for survival. These enable the villagers to bypass the government and engage relatively powerful outsiders, whose support (inadvertent or otherwise) allows them to set the parameters of the village's current existence and identity. Whether mobile or *in situ*, nonhuman entities play crucial diplomatic roles: representing, persuading, enacting, evidencing, drawing in, defining. Their capacity to do so rests partially on their material affordances—the taste and mobility of durians, the electricity-generating properties of turbines, the sensual delights of sunrises and forest breezes. But these nonhuman affordances are themselves animated and given meaningful shape by all-too-human imaginaries: transnational registers of taste and quality, romantic images of remote villages and indigenous people, ecotourist fantasies, humanitarian concerns.

14 Such imaginaries sustain a space in which interests can be represented, relations negotiated, and realities brought into being. The diplomacy that occurs here is thus more-than-human—but its locus does not lie in transient, ever-shifting networks of “quasi-objects”.⁵ Rather, diplomatic negotiations are consciously conducted between people, with the villagers using nonhuman entities as imaginatively infused “indexes”—“visible, physical “things” that causally evidence the village's agency⁶—of their new home, its capacities, its needs, its very existence. Such entities can thus be seen as extensions of the village—material and visual artefacts that the villagers cast out across space and time as their mouthpieces and representatives.⁷

15 Through these diplomatic processes, the villagers can assert, but also pragmatically shore up, the legitimacy of their continued presence in the hills. In a highly unbalanced political milieu in which swidden agriculturalists are often dismissed as not-quite-citizens, such moves are a defiant riposte to earlier criticisms of their legal case. For

them, the new village is not (as critics implied) simply a negative: a remnant of its now-submerged predecessor, a site of political resistance. Rather, it is a place of possibility that is every bit as viable as its “modern” counterparts by the road: a subsistence community that is nevertheless forward thinking, and entrepreneurially engaged with transnational networks and opportunities.

16 These projects are, however, inevitably risky. Bad weather may disrupt visitors’ itineraries or stunt the growth of crops—as happened in 2018, when unexpectedly strong winds buffeted the new durian trees during the fruiting season. Humans, too, are unpredictable and don’t always respond as hoped. A nascent organic ginger- and vegetable-growing venture was nipped in the bud when the entrepreneur pulled out. Some tourists (especially middle-class urbanites from Southeast Asia) complain about the heat, mosquitoes, basic facilities, and lack of punctuality, then threaten to leave poor reviews on the villagers’ Facebook page. Laughingly, my acquaintances told me of a tourist who asked whether it was going to be hot in the village, and another who, upon tasting village-grown pineapple, asked if it had added sugar. Some people just have no idea what village life is like, they mused.

17 But village life also involves internal diplomatic complications that are not visible to outsiders. The durian, ecotourism, and infrastructure-building projects are largely led and managed by Roy and Nyang’s family, who spend a great deal of time and energy persuading, negotiating with, and organizing the other villagers in a bid to sustain their participation. In principle, all agree on the need for diverse economic initiatives to keep the village going. The new projects, however, require more time, labour, and coordination than some households are willing to expend. Durian saplings and ecotourists must be transported and cared for, with seasonal variations. Mini-hydros require small dams and networks of pipes to be set up before they can operate. Consequently, a few households have grown less willing to contribute to one scheme after another. Some are now withholding their labour, while others have moved away from the main site to concentrate on their own farms.

18 Adding to these internal complications are emerging mobilities, which (given the new village’s liminality) may or may not be incursions. After inundation, for example, the area’s fish population—hitherto confined to rivers and streams—swelled, filling the new reservoir. This was followed by a rush of people from the resettlement site, who returned to their now-submerged homes with boats, nets, guns, and poisons to catch fish to sell in town. They took so many, I was told, that there were hardly any left for those still in the hills. But then, did the returnees not have a right to be there—to cruise to their own unsubmerged fields and fruit trees, picking up fish along the way? The villagers in the hills had parcelled out their fishing rights in accordance with customary norms, but they weren’t sure how these applied to returnees—a diplomatic conundrum that remains unresolved today.

19 Still, there are small victories. It was with a wry smile that Nyang recently told me that alarmingly high levels of toxins had been discovered in the middle of the reservoir. Scientists from the university had come to take water samples from different parts of the inundation zone, and found poisonous gases rising from one of the underwater villages. Nyang’s family speculated that the gases came from old solar panel batteries that were not removed before the waters rose. Whatever the case, there was no doubt that fish caught in that part of the reservoir—well away from where they lived—were not safe to eat. “Tell your friends in [another Bidayuh village nearer to town] not to buy fish that’s been caught in this area,” the family warned me, with what looked like grim satisfaction. The past, it seemed, had found its own way to bite back.

20 Toxic gases and poisoned fish are merely two of the many fragments of the past that haunt this new water-scape. Some are more visible than others. Until a few years ago, the only way to reach the affected villages was via a series of undulating forest trails, involving climbs up vertiginous slopes and treks across wobbly bamboo suspension bridges. Today, these are submerged, leaving only the tallest trees and bamboo clumps sticking out of the flat, calm reservoir. Most have slowly rotted beneath the water, gradually turning a deathly silver and finally toppling over. These present a constant hazard for villagers. Navigating the reservoir in their newly acquired boats often involves zigzagging round floating logs and vegetation, and surprises rising from the

surface. These entities briefly puncture the illusion of pristine nature that draws ecotourists to the area—standing, and falling, as striking reminders of what there was.

21 Sometimes, my acquaintances reminisce about the days before the dam, before the village was rent apart by the scheme. Although they haven't completely romanticized the past, they do talk about how things were better, "cooler" (*madud*, i.e. healthier, safer), and easier back then. The contrast is not only temporal but also sensory, emotional, spatial, and ecological. After laying a thin mattress on the floor for me to sleep on during my last visit, Nyang's mother insisted on also putting up a mosquito net, explaining (correctly, in my bodily recollection) that mosquitoes weren't a big problem until recently—and now there were all these "dam mosquitoes" (*prungang dem*) coming up to "eat" (*man*) them.

22 Physically removed from their old homes, temporally and politically removed from the state's modernizing *telos*, and only partially certain of what they want, the villagers are now in an experimental phase, figuring out how best to live in the present and craft a liveable future. Neither they nor the state is sure what to make of the new village: what it will do, look like, become. Despite their tense relations with the government, the villagers are still committed Malaysian citizens who want official recognition, infrastructure, amenities, and rural provisions (e.g. subsidized fertilizer). They also want inclusion and parity with other citizens—which, in effect, means not being denied the benefits of development just because they have deviated from the state's "modernizing" blueprint. For them, more-than-human diplomacies are not merely utilitarian strategies, but also means of asserting their right, as citizens, to live the way that they—not the state, not other Bidayuhs—would like.

23 Making the new village liveable does not mean sinking into nostalgia or grasping wildly at every new opportunity. Rather, it entails trying to stabilize the present while grappling with the insistent co-presence of the past and multiple (sometimes conflicting) futures. Durians, waterfalls, cloud-capped hills, mini-hydros, and the unfinished chapel are all instruments in this process of diplomatic prospection, currently geared towards a single end: the security and viability of the new site. But these diplomatic processes are also prompting the villagers to (re)figure the identity of their current home—to work out, in conversation with non-state others and wider imaginaries, what it is and can become. Unmoored from its previous material incarnation, unrecognized by the state, and still navigating multiple economic possibilities, this is very much a village-in-the-making. Diplomacy may represent parts of it, but—especially as relations develop and initiatives bear fruit—diplomacy is also actively (re)constituting its contours, activities, rhythms, even demographics. Before the dam, the villagers were still very much—as their ethnonym suggests—people of (*bi*) the land, the interior (*dayuh*), swidden agriculturalists who quietly relied on provisions from the state and benevolent outsiders. Today, however, they have *also* become people of the water (so to speak), expertly slicing across the reservoir in their new boats, and using their uphill location to turn themselves into entrepreneurs. The village may have begun life as the home of those who were "fighting the government", but it has since become—and still needs to become—so much more. Quite what that entails, however, is anybody's guess.

24 These transitions—social, spatial, temporal—are encapsulated by the durian nursery that now stands in the overgrown ruins of the old school. Topographically situated between the old submerged village and the new uphill one, it marries (to use Roy's word) native durians with posh imports, resources from a past life with possibilities for the future, loss with hope. On the day that Roy and Nyang brought me there, they took many photos of the young trees and saplings, all to be forwarded to the *towkay*—diplomacy meeting accountability. After lingering a bit, we turned around, preparing to head back up the hill. At this point, I did a double-take: there, where the path forked, was a rusted bunk-bed frame—a remnant from the school dormitory where students from a neighbouring village slept during the week. I'd obviously missed it earlier. Grinning at my surprise, Roy scaled the frame, pretending to get into the top bunk. "Take that up[hill] to your house so that you can sleep in it," I joked. Roy laughed. "No, I'll take it over to the *tanju*"—he gestured back towards the nursery—"for naps when I'm working there!" Today, however, was not the day for it. Leaping nimbly off the

frame, he joined us as we walked back up the hill, thinking and talking about durian futures.

Notes

1 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction. Commodities and the Politics of Value", in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 4.

2 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1998, p. 98.

3 See <https://www.facebook.com/bayanatuh> [last access, October 2020].

4 Liana Chua, "Gifting, Dam(n)ing and the Ambiguation of Development in Malaysian Borneo", *Ethnos* no. 81/4, 2016, pp. 735-757, online : <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.986152> [last access, October 2020].

5 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 142.

6 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

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