# Witnessing the Unseen

## Extinction, spirits, and anthropological responsibility

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**Abstract**
This article draws on two research projects – one on orangutan conservation, and the other on religious change among indigenous Bidayuh communities – to reflect on the relations, technologies and processes involved in producing witnesses and witness-able truths. I compare two forms of witnessing: visualizations of environmental crisis and orangutan extinction, and modes of encountering invisible entities among Bidayuhs. Both involve the challenge of making the unseen visible or apprehensible and thus addressable. But whereas the first entails a crisis-laden visual imaginary that turns witnessing into a form of human stewardship over the environment, the second involves a more relational encounter involving mutual adjustment and responsivity to obligations and commitments. I suggest that this latter mode of witnessing invites us to reimagine both the crisis logic of environmental visualizations and ideals and practices of anthropological witnessing.

**Keywords:** anthropological witnessing, Borneo, extinction, orangutan conservation, spirits, visualizations, the unseen

Unveiling the theme for its 2020 Annual Meeting, the American Anthropological Association announced:

> 'Truth and Responsibility' is a call to reimagine anthropology to meet the demands of the present moment. The imperative to bear witness, take action, and be held accountable to the truths we write and circulate invites us to reflect on our responsibility in reckoning with disciplinary histories, harms, and possibilities. To whom are we giving evidence and toward what ends? For whom are we writing? To whom are we accountable, and in what ways?[1]

These provocations could not be more timely. Although questions of anthropological responsibility, truth-telling and accountability have been debated since at least the 1980s (e.g. Behar 1996; Farmer 2003; Marcus 2005; Scheper-Hughes 1995), they have recently been revived and rearticulated in discussions about anthropologists'

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witnessing responsibilities in a crisis-riddled world (e.g. Bonet and McWilliams 2018; Guilhot 2012; Kurtović 2018; Rosas and Martínez-Cano 2018; Talebi 2019). Sally Wesley Bonet and Julia Ann McWilliams, for example, describe the 'emotional toll' (2018: 118) exacted by their interactions with refugees, and their duty to 'bear witness' to the latter's experiences (2018: 120) – a moral and emotional burden that, they argue, requires more supportive training structures (2018: 121-122). Similarly, reflecting on the Trump administration's 'zero tolerance' policies against undocumented migrants, Gilberto Rosas and Carlos Martínez-Cano portray witnessing as 'one practice in a series of possible [anthropological] interventions' at a time when 'anthropologists must adopt a more radical stance than observation with the term's residues of scientific neutrality' (2018). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has spawned numerous ethnographic projects dedicated to 'witnessing Corona' (as one medical anthropology blog puts it)[2] as SARS-CoV-2 reshapes the world.

Laced with urgency and conviction, such calls to be and bear witness are responses to a specific historical and geopolitical moment. However, they are not new. As our Introduction explains, the depiction of anthropology as a form of witnessing has a long, uneven genealogy – from Nancy Scheper-Hughes' programme for an empathetic, morally committed anthropology-as-witnessing (1995) to George Marcus's advocacy of detached, independent witnessing as activism in itself (2005). What all these interventions share, I suggest, is an 'ennobling view' (Reed-Danahay 2017: 59) of witnessing that revolves around the figure of the anthropologist as a dedicated but not dispassionate documenter: the *eyewitness* who sees, and who must then *bear witness* to what she has seen through various testimonial forms. Pivoting on this duality of witnessing, such approaches 'establish the centrality of the anthropologist' (Angel-Ajani 2004: 136), foregrounding her capacity and authority to speak for, or at least about, others. Yet, as Asale Angel-Ajani argues, this characterization obscures difficult questions about 'the responsibility of the witness and the many ways in which being called to witness is not always noble', as well as 'the conditions that make our work possible … [and] the consequences of our ethnographic production' (2004: 135).

My aim in this article is not to undermine recent efforts to (re)position witnessing at the core of anthropological praxis. Rather, I want to both sound a note of caution and reimagine what anthropological witnessing could entail in the contemporary moment. In the rush to embrace witnessing as a disciplinary imperative, I argue, anthropologists need to guard against presuming both our 'nobility' and our automatic right or duty to witness. Thinking with Angel-Ajani's provocations, I ask instead: what would anthropological witnessing entail if it did *not* centre the anthropologist and her testimony? What do we gain from attending to the processes and conditions of witnessing, as well as the spaces between witnesses, witnessing and testimonial forms? And how might such a relational approach inflect ideas about anthropological rights and responsibilities?

These questions are important because, as the Introduction argues, the literature on anthropological witnessing tends *not* to unpack the term around which it revolves. Aside from a few exceptions (e.g. Dave 2014; Fassin 2008), extant discus-

sions are generally preoccupied with the 'when's and 'where's of anthropological witnessing, but less with its 'how's, 'who's and 'why's: the conditions of its possibility, the means through which it occurs, its effects, and indeed whether it is necessary or desirable. As anthropologists grapple with what it means to be and bear witness in the contemporary world, it is vital that these concerns do not recede from view but continue to inform our ethico-political choices – including, I later argue, the refusal or inability to witness.

To elucidate, I shall think through a heuristic contrast (Strathern 1988) between two forms of witnessing that I have encountered in my current research on orangutan conservation and earlier fieldwork with indigenous Bidayuhs in Borneo: first, the technologies through which orangutan extinction is made visualizable and alarmingly thinkable; and second, the sensory means through which Bidayuhs interact with unseen beings. Extinction and spirits constitute excesses to plain sight, the first because it has not yet happened, the second because they lie beyond the reaches of human vision. By examining the technologies through which both become not only apprehensible but also witness-able – able to elicit particular actions and responses – I show how witnessing is not reducible to 'seeing', but can be understood as an indelibly relational process with different forms and effects. In so doing, I aim to spark thought about the conditions that produce witnesses and enable witnessing, as well as the ethico-political assumptions often bundled up with them. Thinking through this ethnographic juxtaposition, my conclusion sketches a decentred, relational model of anthropological witnessing grounded in the contingencies and uncertainties of the anthropologist's co-presence (Chua 2015) with agentive others in the world.

## Witnessing extinction: the making of 'the world's rarest ape'

We begin in the Batang Toru ecosystem of North Sumatra, Indonesia, which has recently become a battleground over the fate of 'the world's rarest ape' (Leahy 2019). Since 2018, various conservationists within and beyond Indonesia have been protesting against a planned hydropower project in the Batang Toru forest, which poses a specific conservation problem. This forest is home to a species of orangutan – *Pongo tapanuliensis*, a.k.a. the Tapanuli orangutan – that does not exist anywhere else. The dam is due to be constructed in the area with the highest density of Tapanuli orangutans, with the overall project impacting approximately 8 per cent of their habitat (Nater et al. 2017: 3493; Sloan et al. 2018: R650). Scientists argue that infrastructure development and forest loss will further fragment this already small, isolated population of around eight hundred apes, thereby increasing inbreeding and decreasing their long-term population viability (Laurance et al. 2020; Nater et al. 2017: 3493; Sloan et al. 2018: R650–R651; Wich et al. 2019). In short, they contend, the hydropower plant could kill off not just a population but an entire species of orangutan, and must urgently be stopped.[3]

When the Batang Toru project was approved in 2012, however, this connection was not as obvious as it now appears. Instead, the link between the hydropower

plant and orangutan extinction has been generated incrementally since 2018. Tracing this process offers us a glimpse of the technologies through which extinction – as an anticipatory, as-yet-unseen prospect – is made visualizable, knowable and morally compelling (see also Adams 2004; Heise 2016; Sodikoff 2012). In this section, I outline the main 'phases' through which the Tapanuli orangutan has emerged as an object of conservation concern. Each phase is marked by a technology of visualization – which I gloss as revelation, familiarization and mobilization – that invokes and reproduces wider tropes and visual genres. Cumulatively, these portray the Tapanuli orangutan as the world's rarest and most endangered great ape, and the Batang Toru hydropower project as its main threat. We begin, then, with revelation.

Up to 2017, the Tapanuli orangutan did not exist. Or rather, it was not recognized as a distinct species, because there were previously thought to be two species of orangutan – Bornean and Sumatran (Groves 2001).[4] In November 2017, however, *Current Biology* published an article that drew on years of morphometric, behavioural and genomic research to prove the existence of a third, isolated orangutan species – the Tapanuli – members of which had previously been classified as Sumatran (Nater et al. 2017). Towards the end, the authors noted that the Tapanuli population was of 'particularly high conservation concern' due to its size, isolation and environmental changes, including those caused by a proposed hydro-electric project (Nater et al. 2017: 3493).

Rather than revealing the existence of a previously unknown orangutan population, this paper demonstrated that population's distinctiveness as a separate species. This was substantiated by the article's charts and diagrams, which visually summarized and comparatively ordered the research. To use just one example: Figure 2 (Nater et al. 2017: 3491) illustrated the Tapanuli's genetic distinctiveness vis-à-vis the other two species through a map of Sumatra and Borneo that identified different orangutan populations (2A), an analysis of genomic diversity (2B) and a representation of the three species' evolutionary lineages (2C). Marked in yellow across all three, the Batang Toru population stood in bright contrast to the other orangutans in Sumatra, marked red and orange and clustered closer together.

Diagrams like Figure 2 serve not only as representations of data, but as 'apparatuses of scientific reasoning: at one and the same time abstractive and constitutive of empirical realities' (Lynteris 2017: 466). Gathering together and making colourfully visible the relative differences between orangutan species, these diagrams constitute a mode of taxonomic comparison through which judgements about species categories can be made. In so doing, they make the existence of a third orangutan species seeable and thinkable. This is a process of revelation through induction, which, as various scholars have shown, undergirds the empirical, positivist ethos of Western science and its authority (Carey et al. 2016; Daston and Galison 2010; Haraway 1988; Simonetti 2019).

As news of the new species entered the mainstream media, another form of revelation occurred: that of making visible undiscovered realities-out-there. For example, the *New Scientist* magazine ran a story (Woodward 2017) that combined

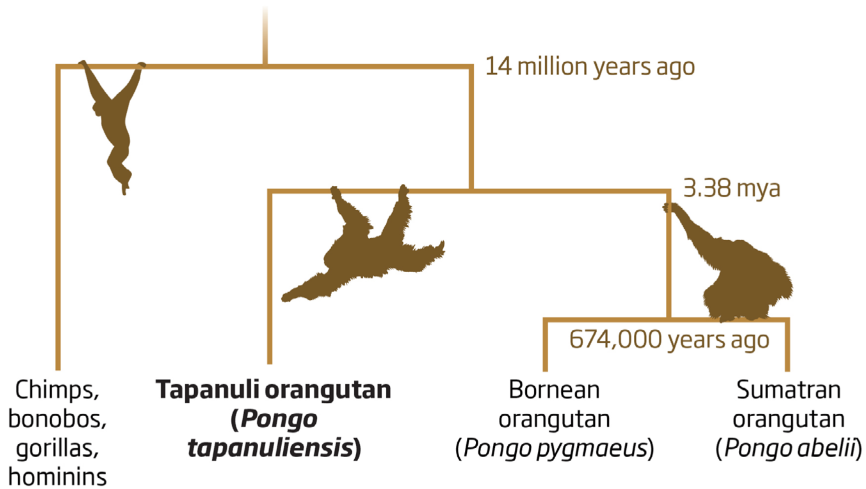


**Figure 1:** 'Our new ginger cousin'. © 2017 *New Scientist* Ltd. All rights reserved. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency.

information from the *Current Biology* article with quotes from conservationists and scientists and relatively digestible scientific evidence: a photograph of the Tapanuli skull used in the morphometric analysis (Figure 1B in Nater et al. 2017: 3489), and a simplified taxonomic diagram – a version of Figure 3B (Nater et al. 2017: 3492) – called 'Our new ginger cousin' (Figure 1), showing 'how the newly discovered Tapanuli orangutan fits into the family tree'. Like the *Current Biology* diagrams, both images work on an evidentiary logic that condenses a vast amount of data into stripped-down, temporally compressed (Simonetti 2019: 248) visualizations. But typically for this genre, these images were not portrayed as the outcome of a long inductive process of taxonomic reconfiguration (the contingency of which was acknowledged in Nater et al. 2017: 3493). Rather, they purported to unveil an exciting, incontrovertibly real fact: the previously hidden existence of the Tapanuli orangutan.

On to the second phase of the story, and the technology of familiarization. Like other media accounts, the *New Scientist* article gave its diagrams a red, hairy reality by also publishing two photographs of the apes. These images familiarized the Tapanuli, asserting its uniqueness by – paradoxically – making it recognizable as an animal that most readers already knew and loved. In the process, the new species became embedded in a familiar narrative that dominates perceptions of orangutans in the Global North (Chua 2018): that of endangerment, extinction and the urgent

need for conservation. This occurred in a video bulletin towards the end of the *New Scientist* article, which raised concerns about the Batang Toru hydro-project. Noting, against footage of a baby Tapanuli orangutan in a tree, that 'there are only 800 of them and they live in an area smaller than London', the video concluded with a drone's-eye view of rivers and forest canopies, and the words: 'Unless their forest is protected they may not be around for much longer'.[5]

If the *Current Biology* article identified the conservation threats facing the Tapanuli orangutan, the *New Scientist* video foregrounded them as intrinsic to the orangutan's story. The orangutan–hydro-project connection has since grown more visible, partly through conservation scientists' advocacy efforts (e.g. Laurance et al. 2020; Sloan et al. 2018; Wich et al. 2019), and partly through the work of Indonesia's largest environmental group, WALHI,[6] which in mid-2018 began a concerted campaign against the Batang Toru project, supported by conservationists around the world. At this point, the hydropower plant and the Tapanuli orangutan – *now* defined as the world's rarest ape – became inextricably linked and internationally known. The Indonesian government has since responded with a strong counter-narrative: that it is safeguarding the Tapanuli orangutan, and that it has the right to use its natural resources to improve its citizens' well-being, without foreign interference.[7] Undergirded by an emergent mood of 'assertive nationalism' (Aspinall 2015), such rejoinders – which I lack space to explore here – have had legal and bureaucratic ramifications for conservationists and scientists working in Indonesia. However, this counter-narrative generally remains invisible to media coverage and conservation imaginaries in the Global North.

One particular visual genre – the view from above – has been central to the save-the-Tapanuli campaign. Like many newspapers and magazines, the *South China Morning Post* (AFP 2018), for example, combined the headline – 'China-backed dam in Indonesia rainforest to cut through home of world's rarest orangutan' – with a startling visual contrast and portent: an aerial photograph of stark, orangey-brown, newly cleared land surrounded by lush, as-yet-untouched, green forest. The affective power of visual juxtapositions has also been harnessed by scientists, among them biologist James Askew (co-author of the *Current Biology* article), who created a set of temporally contrasting visualizations to highlight the escalating threat to the Tapanuli orangutan: a time-lapse video of the dam's construction between June 2017 and February 2019;[8] and a before-and-after comparison of the area in the same period.[9]

Such visualizations manifest, at a glance, the 'declensionist' logic (Heise 2016: 7) that pervades Western and international environmentalist movements – a logic of ongoing loss and decline from a better, richer, biodiverse past (see also Adams 2004; Bowker 2005; Sodikoff 2012). They perform what Cristián Simonetti, writing about glaciologists' efforts to make geological time 'graspable', calls 'compression' and 'acceleration' (2019: 248), in this case the compression of centuries of pristine forest growth into a single contrastive image that generates an accelerated sense of its destruction by humans. Such views thus act as a technology of anticipation – and warning – of what will happen if things continue at this rate.

Stitched together in the same global visual-cultural circuits (McLagan 2005; McLagan and McKee 2012), scientific diagrams, wildlife photography and overhead views cumulatively constitute a genre of 'crisis witnessing' (Hänsch, this issue) through which extinction is made thinkable, not as a generic possibility but as a concrete, imminent danger facing one species.[10] The emotive charge of this assemblage derives from its making visible what *specifically* could be lost, as well as its imbrication with a long-running Euro-American imaginary of extinction built around 'an awareness of nature's beauty and value … intimately linked to a foreboding sense of its looming destruction' (Heise 2016: 7).

This sense of foreboding is amplified, however, by the awareness that extinction is not inevitable. Here, we enter the third phase of the save-the-Tapanuli campaign, in which technologies of familiarization and mobilization converge to sustain two overlapping modes of witnessing. First is the evidentiary use of images and diagrams as visual testimony (see also Carey et al. 2016; Carruth and Marzec 2014; Lynteris 2017; Rudiak-Gould 2013). Viewed against the cleared earth, freshly dug roads and spectre of the dam, orangutans and forests appear as mute, bruised, material witnesses. Not unlike the figure of the martyr-witness, such nonhuman entities cannot, it is assumed, lie, but 'bea[r] witness without speaking, testif[ying] through the sacrifice' of their lives (Fassin 2008: 541; see also Peters 2009: 33), their environmental martyrdom asserted and reproduced through conservation media.

Such visual testimony engenders and authorizes a second kind of witnessing – the morally charged act of looking, acknowledging and acting. Combined with discourses about extinction, these images constitute what Peter Redfield calls 'motivated truth': 'a positioned assemblage of fact and value' (2006: 5) that seeks to 'disturb and motivate reaction' (2006: 12) from its viewers, who (like the audiences of humanitarian aid campaigns) are transformed into 'virtual witnesses, a subject position that implies responsibility for the suffering of others' (McLagan 2003: 609; see also Allen 2009; Boltanski 1999; Dave 2014). It is arguably this sense of responsibility that has galvanized opponents of the dam – from scientists and activists to members of the public – into taking action against it, whether through articles, petitions or demonstrations.

Rachel Douglas-Jones (this issue) has described how different facets of the 'committee as witness' come together as a single voice to produce 'legitimate decisions'. Similarly, the technologies of revelation, familiarization and mobilization come together – in international imaginaries, at least – to produce the moral and visual scaffolding of the save-the-Tapanuli campaign. Within it dwell three key figures: the environmental victim (= Tapanuli orangutan, Batang Toru forest); 'bad' humans (= corporations and governments) destroying a pristine ecosystem; and 'good' human witness-saviours (= conservationists, journalists, the public) who see the victim, register its victimhood and bear witness to its plight through awareness-raising or direct action. Juxtaposed thus, these figures sustain a fundamentally anthropocentric configuration of responsibility, culpability and agency, with humans portrayed as responsible for causing and averting the extinction of the Tapanuli orangutan.

Here, however, an important question emerges: which humans *are* these? As critics point out (e.g. Demos 2017; Malm and Hornborg 2014; Yusoff 2010), international environmentalist discourses often invoke a homogenized, generic figure of 'humanity' that glosses over the differential responsibilities for and impacts of environmental destruction: not all humans are equally culpable of damaging the planet, just as not all humans are equally affected by the damage. In the save-the-Tapanuli campaign, as in other international imaginaries of orangutan extinction, the most visible human players are external to Batang Toru: corporations, governments, witness-saviours in cities and the Global North. But left largely invisible are the other humans (and nonhumans) that live in and around the Batang Toru forest.

In August 2017, some of these people carried out a protest against the hydro-project in a village near the dam. Revolving around land rights and fair compensation, it led to a scuffle that was captured on video[11] and reported locally and on environmental news sites, while receiving minimal international attention. Routinely depicted by the state as beneficiaries of development, these communities were also incorporated into the save-the-Tapanuli campaign, but mainly to highlight their status as victims who, like the orangutan, needed help (e.g. Hanafiah 2018). Yet there is some evidence that opinions here are mixed: that some people oppose the project while others support it, especially if it brings them work and income (Hewson 2019).[12]

Anthropologists will be familiar with such local complexities. However, there is little visual, political or conceptual room for such messiness in dominant conservation narratives, which are structured around that moral triangle of 'good' humans, 'bad' humans, and nonhuman victims (see also Igoe 2010; Massé 2019). The persistent occlusion of such communities' presence and agency is reflected on social media: searching for 'Tapanuli' or 'Batang Toru' on Twitter and Facebook, for example, reveals a rush of posts related to orangutans and the dam. Yet preceding them are posts from local residents about daily life in the area. Like the video of the village protest, these disrupt the visual assemblage of the save-the-Tapanuli campaign. They briefly make visible a different Tapanuli and Batang Toru, reasserting their existence as peopled places that lie beyond the reach of international conservation imaginaries.

We shall return to orangutan conservation later. In the next section, we turn to a less dramatic, more quotidian setting – the rural Bidayuh villages where I have worked since 2003 – and a rather different logic of witnessing.

## Witnessing with the soul

Living in the hilly hinterlands of the state capital, Bidayuhs constitute the second largest indigenous group in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. Until the 1970s, most Bidayuhs were subsistence rice farmers and followers of a ritual complex loosely known as *gawai*. Since then, many villagers have taken up urban waged employment, and nearly the entire population has converted to Christianity. Such rapid changes, however, have not led to the abandonment of old spirit beliefs and rela-

tions, for invisible beings remain part of day-to-day life, even in mostly Christian villages.[13] Although they cannot be seen, they can, I argue, be witnessed – apprehended in various sensory ways, thus becoming embedded in a relational matrix as agentive presences that demand responses.

The challenges of living with these beings were described by 'John', an engineer and Catholic prayer leader in his thirties. Humans, he said, could see with their eyes (*beto*) and their soul (*simangi*), although the soul could see things that the eyes could not. And when the soul saw things, the human body registered it in different ways. As an example, John recounted the time he went to the city morgue to identify the body of a young village man who had died in an accident. When the drawer was opened, said John, he and his companion were overwhelmed by the smell of the corpse. However hard he washed, the smell clung to him for two weeks, making him feel really ill, a state he attributed to his soul having seen something that his eyes did not. John added, partly as a warning to me, that one could encounter many unseen things in village life: charms, potent objects, and beings that had existed before conversion and would never go away. Of course, he said uneasily, things were safer today because almost everyone was Christian, which meant that there were fewer invisible entities around, and that humans were better protected by prayers, holy water, rosaries and other Christian elements.

This conversation encapsulates what are fairly widespread Bornean understandings about unseen presences (e.g. Appleton 2012; Couderc and Sillander 2012; Metcalf 1982; Sather 2001). As elsewhere in Borneo, Bidayuh lifeworlds consist of 'two dimensions of the same reality (living beings versus invisible entities), ontologically distinct as much as intimately associated' (Béguet 2012: 258). In day-to-day interaction, these realms remain separate: humans should *not* see – at eye- or soul-level – invisible beings, and if they do, they will almost certainly fall ill or encounter misfortune. However, there are 'safe' ways by which humans can come to know these beings and recognize their presence, such as through smell, sound and somatic states (Chua 2011). There are also times when invisible entities cross that divide, and momentarily take apprehensible form to interact with humans.

This is illustrated by the story of the main guardian spirit of the village where I did my PhD fieldwork. This village is surrounded by hills (Figure 2), each with its own spirit. Of these, the most important is a white crocodile that lives under the bridge at the village's entrance and surfaces whenever there are dangers facing the community. According to both Christians and *gawai* practitioners, this spirit was originally a pig that was due to be sacrificed for a major *gawai* ritual. The pig, however, escaped and jumped into the river, where it transformed into a crocodile. Its spirit later appeared to a village elder as the pig in a dream – a safe visible mode (see also Stolz 2018: 113) – to let them know what had happened. It told the elder that if the villagers saw it, they would have to hold a ritual to restore safety and wellness to the village.

This bridge caused some controversy during my fieldwork. Although it was old and rickety, the *gawai* practitioners had staunchly refused to let the village committee replace it, fearing that blowing it up would chase away the crocodile and

**Figure 2:** The village and surrounding hills. Credit: Liana Chua.

bring misfortune to the village. After prolonged negotiations with the public works department, the committee eventually elected to build a new bridge next to the old one and dismantle the latter. Before this, the village held a major *gawai* ritual to tell (*da'an*) the white crocodile and other place spirits what would happen, and ask for their blessing. The event was attended and supported with food, drink and cash by many villagers, Christian and otherwise. Thankfully, the crocodile did not protest, and a new bridge was built without mishaps.

This story exemplifies how many Bidayuhs continue to engage in relations with unseen beings – among them ancestors, souls of the dead, place spirits and, increasingly, Christian personages such as God, Jesus and Mary. Some, like the white crocodile or God, have long-standing relationships with humans; others do not. For example, in the past, and to a lesser extent today, villagers would read the movements and cries of birds and other animals while walking to and from farms, fruit gardens and other parts of the forest (Chua 2009). These creatures were understood to be either the visible form that spirits took or 'messengers' from spirits that told people about dangers lying ahead – 'like handphones', as one old man told me. If a farmer saw a bird flying a certain way or heard a certain sequence of cries, they would thus take it as a warning to stop or turn back; ignoring it would almost certainly cause an accident or illness.

These examples, I suggest, manifest a particular logic of witnessing that inflects my Bidayuh acquaintances' relations with unseen beings. A few characteristics mark this logic. First, each encounter entails the manifestation and momentary stabilization of a specific relation between human and unseen entity, the temporal depth of which varies enormously. When the crocodile surfaces from its watery abode to warn of danger, it reasserts a long-standing tutelary relation with the village reaching back several generations. When an omen bird appears, it establishes a new, usually temporary relation with its seer or hearer. And when people feel 'cool' in their *ashŭng* – life-force – after praying or dabbing holy water on themselves, this is seen as reaffirmation of God's age-old covenant of love with humankind, of which they are now part.

Secondly, such encounters entail mutual obligation and responsibility. When humans receive messages from unseen beings, they must respond: hold a ritual, stop work, go to church. This obligation arises not at the point of encounter, but at the point when humans understand and register the message. I suggest that it is this moment of 'activation' – of understanding and acknowledgement – that transforms such encounters into forms of witnessing. At this point, humans go from merely seeing, hearing or feeling – one-way reception – to responding, engaging and acting (see also Dave 2014). Doing so actualizes (Remme 2016) that relationship, producing in that moment two distinct subject positions: guardian spirit and villager, spirit messenger and responsible moral agent, God and Christian. Importantly, unseen beings are also obliged to do their bit. If humans perform rituals or make offerings, spirits are duty-bound to do as they're told – keep the village safe, for example, or not disrupt construction of a new building. A slightly modified logic exists with Christianity. Although my acquaintances acknowledge that God, Jesus and other personages are far more powerful than the old spirits and thus less amenable to bribes or admonitions, they can nevertheless seek to draw forth these figures' mercy, compassion and love through their prayers and responses to whatever they construe as God's will.

Activating a relationship thus gives humans and unseen beings varying degrees of influence over, and vulnerability to, each other. Spirits can (bear) witness and respond to humans' actions as much as humans can (bear) witness and respond to theirs (see also, e.g., Hinton 2014: Chapter 6). The implications of this logic became clear during my PhD when, in inquisitive anthropological mode, I badgered the old *gawai* practitioners about the conventions governing their interactions with unseen beings. Though happy to share some information, many of them balked at saying too much, because of the obligations that came with such knowledge. As I explain elsewhere (Chua 2009), to know was to become entangled in relations with unseen beings, and my elderly interlocutors were unwilling to jeopardize an already incompetent ethnographer who could easily upset spirits by getting things wrong. Indeed, I discovered that many young Christian villagers opted not to learn about these conventions for the same reason: to protect themselves from becoming embroiled in problematic relational obligations from previous generations.

Finally, such relationships contain an inbuilt unpredictability, the fate of the old spirits being a case in point. John's observation that there were fewer old spirits around because everyone was Christian encapsulated the widespread understanding that unseen beings' presence and power in the village were inevitably affected by humans' actions. If humans kept doing rituals and following prescriptions, the spirits' influence would persist; as fewer people engaged with them, they would find other things to do. Some villagers hazarded that the spirits would return to their homes – mountains, rivers, forests – or take on different forms. Others, including *gawai* practitioners, posited that the spirits would 'follow' humans and eventually become Christian too. Not being spirits, however, nobody could – or would – claim to know for certain.

## Comparisons

Let us now take an analytical step back and consider the two modes of witnessing that we have just explored. Both revolve around the same question: how does the unseen become apprehensible, knowable and actable upon? And both involve a movement between what John Durham Peters calls the 'two faces' of witnessing: 'the passive one of seeing [or, I would add, sensing] and the active one of saying [or doing]' (2009: 26), with the first 'authoriz[ing]' the second: 'an active witness first must have been a passive one' (ibid.). For conservation supporters and Bidayuhs, witnessing the otherwise unseeable – extinction or spirits – necessitates bearing witness, in the sense of acknowledging one's implication in the process, then acting upon it, whether through activism or ritual.

But here, some differences emerge. First, the process of making extinction witness-able involves fostering certitude in order to generate a compelling, crisis-laden truth, with scientific diagrams, wildlife photography and views from above collectively playing testimonial, predictive and galvanizing roles. This evidentiary process pares away uncertainty and ambiguity, translating scientific mastery of taxonomic and other data into witnesses' sense of mastery over 'the fate of the orangutan'. The resultant stripped-down triangle between 'good' humans, 'bad' humans and environmental victims channels agency and moral authority into human hands – or more specifically, into the hands of faraway human witnesses, who are enjoined to save the (mute, passive) orangutan victim.

If this first mode of witnessing consistently centres the human witness, the second consistently decentres it. In the moment that the human bears witness to the spirit's presence, both parties become each other's witnesses: the spirit sees and responds to the human's actions, just as the human has responded to its presence. What are thus foregrounded are not individual parties, but the relations between them and the obligations they entail. Yet such mutual accountability does not translate to certainty, for this second mode of witnessing lacks the moral sureness and one-way concentration of agency that characterizes the first. Here, witnessing is not a singular act, but an ongoing process of mutual adjustment – sometimes across

generations, as happened when more Bidayuhs converted to Christianity, followed eventually (my acquaintances theorize) by some of the old spirits.

To clarify, I am neither suggesting that these two examples are meaningfully connected, nor drawing a putative dichotomy between Western and non-Western ontologies. Rather, these are ethnographic analogues (in Strathern's [1988] sense) that I have juxtaposed to tease out the varied technologies, logics and relations through which witnessing occurs. Critically attending to these processes means acknowledging the contingent nature of witnessing, as well as the possibility (also raised in the Introduction) of decoupling witnessing from specific witness-subjects. In closing, I shall attempt to take things further by returning to the question of anthropological witnessing, and contemplating what ethical and analytical lessons this comparative exercise might bring to the contemporary disciplinary moment.

## Decentring anthropological witnessing

In many ways, the conservation model of the human witness-saviour and the ideal of the 'noble' anthropological witness are analogous figures. Indeed, both derive from the same ocular-centric, Euro-American epistemological tradition, one underpinned by a 'scientific claim to authority [that] hinges on its ability to perceive what cannot be seen' (Rudiak-Gould 2013: 123). If witnesses to orangutan extinction derive their authority from what those on the ground cannot see – scientific data, wildlife photography, views from above – anthropologists derive their authority and assumed responsibility to bear witness on the basis of what they have (eye-)witnessed in the field. This, too, is a one-way process that centres the anthropologist as an expert witness and her 'authoritative act of speaking, giving voice, reclaiming and reconstructing an event' (Angel-Ajani 2004: 142). But – recalling the Batang Toru case – what does this authoritative witnessing process occlude or render *in*visible? And how might we bring these unseen realities back into the orbit of our attention?

Perhaps it is here that we can draw inspiration from Bidayuhs' encounters with unseen beings to destabilize both conservation and anthropological models of authoritative, witness-centred witnessing. Specifically, I suggest that the relational sensibilities that animate Bidayuhs' engagements with spirits can precipitate a decentred mode of witnessing that, rather than arrogating the duty to witness to one figure, requires all parties to adjust to each other and recognize the differential responsibilities bound up in their relations. In this view, the human steward of nature or the anthropologist would not be the only or primary witness; rather, she too would constantly be watched, made knowable, and evaluated by other witnesses, who have the right to look (Mirzoeff 2011) and look back, as well as their own agendas, expectations and capacities for action. Acknowledging the presence and gaze of these other witnesses – from unseen beings to forest inhabitants (human and nonhuman) to fieldwork interlocutors – means asking: who is witnessing the witness? What does this mutuality of witnessing demand? What effects do the

processes and artefacts of witnessing have, and who will evaluate them? And, crucially, how do we deal with those moments when witnessing is refused, impossible or problematic?

Such relational questions have been explored in various anthropological guises, such as through experiments in dialogic and biographical ethnography (e.g. Behar 1996; Biehl 2005; Crapanzano 1980; Shostak 1981). They have also been problematized by scholars such as Eve Tuck, who calls for a moratorium on 'damage-centered research' that takes a 'pathologizing approach in which … oppression singularly defines a [marginalized] community' (2009: 413), and Audra Simpson, who uses 'ethnographic refusal' to interrupt anthropology's epistemological ambitions (2007). My point is not to go over old ground, but to bring these questions back into view in a disciplinary moment when they are easily overlooked. Rather than centring the anthropologist and her testimony, a relational, decentred approach mandates a critical, reflexive view of *how* witnessing occurs in the spaces between and around witness-figures and their testimonies (see also Douglas-Jones, Fryer-Moreira, Grinberg, this issue): in the uncertain and sometimes fraught relations of fieldwork (Angel-Ajani 2004; Chua 2015), the uneven practices of distilling ethnographic impressions into writing, and the sometimes unintended afterlives that artefacts and relations of witnessing acquire.

Writing about witnessing in this way is one thing, but what about enacting it? Rather than making a programmatic list, I draw on my fieldwork experiences to gesture towards some possibilities. First, instead of assuming that anthropologists have an automatic right or duty to be/bear witness, I argue, it is vital to attend to *how* such rights are acquired and negotiated as part of a larger web of relations, obligations and commitments. My entanglement in the knowledge economies of Bidayuh spirit relations brought this home with great immediacy. Acknowledging my elderly acquaintances' refusal (Simpson 2007) to reveal too much, I stopped asking, and instead wrote about what they would reveal in general terms, and not at all about certain things. Here, my scholarly urge to bear witness to a dying ritual complex and lifeworld gave way to my obligations to its practitioners, and to younger villagers who might not want to encounter such knowledge. Accepting the impossibility of fully (eye-)witnessing and the *un*desirability of bearing witness became an ethical, relational priority (Simpson 2007; see also Tuck 2009).

Second, decentring the anthropological witness could entail experimenting with alternative modes of anthropological being and witnessing. In hindsight, this happened when, over time, I too began to feel and recognize invisible beings (Chua 2011). Suspending the methodological agnosticism of my academic training and clumsily re-attuning my somatic and emotional impulses, I learned to witness the unseen *with* my interlocutors, and to respond appropriately to these encounters, rather than merely (eye-)witnessing them at one remove. Feeling discomfitingly vulnerable to the spirit interactions with which everyone lived, I began to view anthropological witnessing less as a right or distinctive duty than as a means of sustaining my connections in the village. Importantly, witnessing-with did not always culminate in verbal or written testimony; much of it never became visible in

my scholarship. Rooted in village socialities, these experiences disrupted the often taken-for-granted transition from anthropological *eye-witnessing* to *bearing witness* through publications and other testimonial artefacts. As such, they challenge us to explore other forms and enactments of anthropological witnessing, beyond conventional epistemological formats such as academic outputs.

I cite these examples not as prescriptions, but as practical possibilities for a relational, decentred mode of anthropological witnessing. These underscore the ongoing need for critical reflection about the conditions in which witnessing occurs, the responsibilities it implies, and the limits and constraints that also structure it. Put differently, rather than simply *asserting* that anthropologists have a particular duty to be/bear witness, perhaps we need to ask both more basic and more complicated questions – such as who or what invested us with this duty, what and how we can or are expected to witness, what witnessing might conceal, and whether witnessing is always necessary or desirable. For a discipline built around revelation, explanation and, increasingly, mobilization, the prospect of concealing knowledge, staying silent or refusing to (bear) witness is unsettling, yet these practices too must be understood as constitutive of the anthropologist's task (see also Simpson 2007; Tuck 2009). To acknowledge their centrality is to acknowledge our own embeddedness and complicity in relational webs and processes, in which anthropologists may not be the only witnesses.

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## Notes

1. https://www.americananthro.org/AM_Theme?navItemNumber=25372. The meeting was cancelled due to COVID-19, and the theme carried over to 2021.
2. https://www.medizinethnologie.net/formate/witnessing_corona/.
3. Scheduled for completion in 2022, the project has been delayed by up to three years by funding issues and COVID-19. https://www.dunia-energi.com/proyek-plta-batang-toru-molor-hingga-2025/.
4. This taxonomic arrangement was itself a revision of the earlier classification of Bornean and Sumatran orangutans as part of a single species.
5. https://youtu.be/UZu7iQh2Zf8.
6. Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (Indonesian Forum for the Environment).
7. For some recent examples, see: https://www.foresthints.news/indonesian-authorities-refute-claim-on-batang-toru-hydropower-project-in-iucn-blog/ and https://jakartaglobe.id/movement/criticism-of-batang-toru-hydropower-project-misplaced-govt-house.
8. https://www.planet.com/stories/batang-toru-hydrodam-progress-jun-2017-feb-2019-FVoXFz3mg.
9. https://www.planet.com/stories/before-and-after-batang-toru-hydrodam-development--mVzkVzqmR.
10. See Rudiak-Gould 2013 and Simonetti 2019 for parallel examples of visualization and concretization in climate science.
11. https://youtu.be/mm5vG38JZiM.
12. https://youtu.be/n9DeF1ufJTk.
13. For details on Bidayuh conversion and negotiations of their spirit relations, see Chua 2009, 2011 and 2012. These resonate with similar ethnographic insights into human–spirit relations across Southeast Asia (see, e.g., Århem and Sprenger 2016; Endres and Lauser 2011; Remme 2016; Stolz 2018).

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