

# The Tarob and the Sacred Oath. Liminal Spirits and Stories Creating Heterotopic Spaces in Dusun Culture

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## Abstract

This article explores two stories told during the production of the transmedia documentary project *Big Stories, Small Towns: Bongkud-Namaus* in the Dusun villages of Bongkud and Namaus in Sabah, Malaysia. Both stories relate to hungry and sacred entities – an atomised, monstrous moon-eating spirit called the Tarob, and a sacred oath bound in blood, which eats anyone who breaks it. The article will introduce the *Big Stories, Small Towns* project, the process that underpins this project and the site of production in Sabah of one iteration of the *Big Stories, Small Towns*, before analysing heterotopic conceptions associated with aspects of folklore in the Southeast Asian region. Providing a theoretical framework that reflects upon a key text by Evans (1953) – an early translator of Dusun folklore for Western audiences – aspects of Dusun culture will be explored that illuminate details of the two case study stories. An historical and theoretical treatment of the stories will frame a fusion of transmedia and folklore in manifesting liminal beings to emergence. This fusion of transmedia and folklore facilitates representation and remediation of cultural identities, thus enabling a wider society – in this case Malaysian society – to develop a more nuanced cultural awareness of itself.

**Keywords:** transmedia, web documentary, Dusun, Sabah, Southeast Asian folklore

## Introduction

In this article I explore two stories told during the production of the transmedia documentary project *Big Stories, Small Towns* in the villages (*kampung*) of Bongkud-Namaus in Sabah, Malaysia. Both stories relate to hungry and sacred entities – an atomised, monstrous moon eating spirit called the Tarob, and a sacred oath bound in blood, which eats anyone who breaks it. The article will introduce the project, the site of production and the process that underpins *Big Stories, Small Towns* before looking at heterotopic conceptions around folklore in the Southeast Asian region. This section will introduce theoretical frameworks that will be used to reflect upon a key text by Evans (1953) – an early translator of Dusun folklore for Western audiences. With Evans' text as a foundational document I will explore particular aspects of Dusun culture that will serve to illuminate details of the two stories produced within the *Big Stories, Small Towns: Bongkud-Namaus* project that

are case studies for this article. I will then recount these stories in light of the historical and theoretical framing previously outlined describing a fusion of transmedia and folklore in manifesting liminal beings to emergence. This fusion of transmedia and folklore facilitates representation and remediation of cultural identities, thus enabling a wider society – in this case Malaysian society – to develop a more nuanced cultural awareness of itself.

### **Big stories, small towns: Bongkud-Namaus**

In the *Big Stories, Small Towns* project – a transmedia documentary that has been evolving since 2008 – a key underpinning assumption is that the collective identity and living memory of a community is woven together from a thousand stories. The stories and tales we tell others and ourselves are how we imagine and re-imagine our world as well as our connected selves (Potter, 2014, p. 2). Since 2008 the project has facilitated the telling, recording, archiving and dissemination of hundreds of auto/biographical narratives in towns in Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, West Papua and Malaysia. *Big Stories* shows local stories in a range of settings from TV to art galleries and in a global forum via the bigstories.com.au website, reflecting other transmedia projects where, as Edmond (2015, p. 1575) notes, “physical and mediated spaces increasingly overlap.” Uricchio (2008, p. 111) observes this calls attention to the larger ordering strategies that give public memory its contours. This overlapping offers a way to move beyond what is seen in order to consider a way of seeing or being in the world. The idea of transmedia as overlapping various spaces, and enabling opportunities for shaping public memory, speaks to anthropological concepts of liminality as described by Van Gennep (1977 [1960]) and expanded on by Turner (1974). While Van Gennep invoked the limen (Latin for threshold) to convey the idea of a boundary being crossed in a rite of passage, Turner adapted the notion of liminality beyond the ritual to look at a diverse range of societies and to explain the form that transitional social crises regularly take. As Turner (1974, p. 239) notes, “major liminal situations are occasions on which a society takes cognizance of itself.” Underlying both concepts of transmedia and liminality is an attempt to capture the way that actions, which may be purely local, can take on wider resonances that encompass the whole of society. In fact, the byline of the *Big Stories* project is “local stories, global impact.” (Potter, 2014)

The *Big Stories* project is based around filmmakers-in-residence living in small towns and making stories with local residents. With the support of a number of financial partners, including the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia and FINAS-Malaysia, the *Big Stories* team – led by myself and Sabahan filmmaker Nadira Ilana – ran film and photography workshops in the ethnic Dusun village of Bongkud in Sabah, Malaysia. We assisted locals in producing films and images with a focus on their Dusun heritage, relationships and dreams.

The allied villages of Namaus and Bongkud are situated on the outskirts of the town of Ranau, approximately 140km from Sabah’s capital city of Kota Kinabalu and 20km south-east from Mt. Kinabalu. This mountain features in many Dusun stories including a creation story where

*Suminundu*, the wife of the male god *Kinorohingan*,<sup>1</sup> remade the flat land into the island of Borneo with Mt. Kinabalu at its centre towering above the clouds. Ranau is an important agricultural and tourism centre in Sabah.<sup>2</sup> The villagers of Bongkud and Namaus work in these industries, as well as being local entrepreneurs running businesses that mostly service these key industries. The region is extremely fertile and is the largest producer of highland vegetables in Sabah and is home to the Sabah Tea plantation and Poring Hot Springs. However, there is also an increasing prevalence of palm oil plantations. The region was once the country's largest producer of copper, supplying jobs to Sabahan workers from all over the state until the toxic mine was shut down in 1999.

The name 'Bongkud' comes from a Dusun word meaning 'bent' after a crooked coconut tree was once found there, while the name 'Namaus' is based on a tale about an upset maiden. The two villages bonded in the 1950s when villagers from Namaus moved over to Bongkud village. Today the villages are a subsistence ethnic Christian Dusun community with a Muslim minority, but pre-Christian and pre-Muslim belief systems persist and pervade many aspects of everyday society. The Dusun population across the Sabah region are now known as Kadazandusun and are broken down across 79 location based sub-ethnicities such as: Tempasuk Dusuns, Tatana Dusuns, and the Ranau Dusuns where Bongkud-Namaus is located. Reid (1997) identifies the Ranau Dusuns as closely representative of the original Dusun as they inhabit the area that is considered the place of origin of the Dusuns – Nunuk Ragang, a giant banyan tree.

The Kadazandusun form the largest ethnic group in Sabah, at one time comprising nearly 40% of the population (Evans, 1953), with Saw (2015) reporting over half a million Dusun people in Sabah in 2010. Evans (1953), and other contemporaneous researchers (Glyn-Jones, 1953; Williams, 1966), describe the area of the Dusun peoples around Mt. Kinabalu as a notorious place of headhunters with intimations of cannibalistic rituals. This sensational notoriety can easily dominate discussions of traditional cultural Dusun practices. However, the belief system and cosmology of the Dusun people is complex and sophisticated and extends far beyond titillating tales of exotic cannibals. This belief system and cosmology is key in understanding the practice of rituals among this community and the perpetuation of beliefs, community and local governance practices that emerge from the cultural and loric spaces of the stories and myths of the Dusun.

During the *Big Stories* residency in Bongkud village, numerous stories relating to the broader belief system and cosmography of the Dusun people were recounted to the filmmakers-in-residence. Two of these stories were defined by sacred and hungry entities. And these stories

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<sup>1</sup> Kinorohingan is one of the names given to the main male deity who, with his female counterpart (sometimes also called Kinorohingan as well as Suminundu, Manmorun or Warunsansadon), created the earth and the sky.

<sup>2</sup> For Australians, Ranau also carries historical significance as the site of the most devastating crime perpetuated against Australian Prisoners of War during World War Two. According to the Australian War Memorial over 1000 Australian soldiers were forced to march approximately 250 kilometres from Sandakan to Ranau through dense jungle and rough terrain by Japanese soldiers. Only 6 survived this brutal ordeal.

form the basis for reflections and theorising around folklore, and the notion of folklore as both a form of spatio-symbolic liminality and as law.

Baumann (2015) in reflecting on metaphors for defecating in Southeast Asian cultures observes that spatio-symbolic liminality identifies particular areas (the forest, rice field and boat landing) as both 'proper' spaces (i.e. spaces that are demarcated for a particular communal use – such as defecating) and as spaces where mythical supernatural beings reside. Baumann's essay is useful in reflecting upon how communal spaces in these cultures are often imbued with a mythical and supernatural property that seems to demarcate space according to a Lefebvrian concept of heterotopia where "something different" is fundamental in the expression of radical possibilities. As observed in Louth and Potter (2017, forthcoming) both space and place, in this sense, are multidimensional and sustained by discursive practices. This speaks to how we might understand the enormity of international relations and social structures through to the everyday intimacy of relations in the private sphere. The normalisation and the reproduction of particular social practices are linked to the expansion and penetration of a hegemony that rationalises, atomises and homogenises the world around us. In the context of Kadazandusun culture, a key question must be how competing forms of self and society are repressed, or exploit opportunities in the liminal spaces that exist beyond Malaysian state and market-based practices.

### **The moon eaters**

The moon looms large in our nocturnal horror stories. As the largest light source in the night, the sometimes benevolent, sometimes malicious, sometimes foolish moon is a common beacon for mythology - often represented as the only light that exists between humanity and eternal darkness. Giant, malevolent moon (and often sun and sky) eating creatures – from the Nordic wolf Mánagarmr (sometimes known as Hati) to the dragon known as Bakunawa in the Philippines (and the real world Minokawa, a giant bird rumoured to be descended from the mythical Bakunawa) – threaten to consume the celestial space beyond the world and to confirm the fear many harbour that we are alone in the universe.

Evans (1953, p.40) recounts in his book *Religion of the Tempasuk Dusuns*, the mythical animal that attempts to swallow the moon (and sometimes the sun) thereby causing eclipses. This creature is named Tarob (also Darob, Barob or Arob). Evans notes that the appearance of the creature changes in different accounts – from a crocodile to the son of *Oduk Minantob*, a daughter of *Kinorohingan*, who guards the way that souls take to *Nabalu* (Mt. Kinabalu) and opens the gate for those whose time has come. Nevertheless, Evans is always focussed on the material manifestation of the Tarob. During the course of the residency in Bongkud, I became fascinated by the apparent immaterial and atomised nature of the Tarob. The lack of materiality and the diffused and atomised construct of the spirit seemed to offer a framework for re-imagining subjugated cultural spaces. I also saw in this atomised spirit a correlation with the current landscape of competing sets of meaning, symbols, icons, images and language conceptualised by Appadurai (2000, p. 33) as the mediascape, which has collapsed old and new media and transformed the arena of public opinion and agency. This spirit can occur in

many forms: it can possess bodies (in the case of the Tarob - bodies of fish, buffalo and other animals), or it can possess objects (rock, dirt, or even water), or it can be of the air.

The notion of a spatial, atomised and diffused spirit that exists in many forms and places, often simultaneously, is a heterotopic notion. And while 'atomisation' is often used (see Lefebvre 1978, 1980, in Brenner & Elden, 2009) to reflect on narratives of disempowerment,<sup>3</sup> this atomised and diffused spirit embodies the idea of a heterotopia in both the Foucauldian and Lefebvrian conceptions – which are often represented as radically different (Harvey, 2012, p. xvii-xviii). Foucauldian heterotopias are other spaces, off-centre with respect to the normal and everyday. The Dusun conception of the Tarob exists in a similar way, destroying spatial and corporeal syntax holding bodies and objects together. Turning to the Lefebvrian conception of heterotopia, Harvey (2012, p. xvii) states that Lefebvre's heterotopia delineates liminal social spaces of possibility where "something different" is not only possible but also fundamental for the defining of revolutionary trajectories. And while Lefebvre is a Marxist urban geographer he argues that "every society – and hence every mode of production with its sub-variants... produces a space, its own space" (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974], p. 31). Lefebvre's concept of the State mode of production has many analytical functions (see Brenner & Elden, 2009; Elden, 2004, Ch. 6). However, Lefebvre consistently mobilizes this concept in a variety of settings to characterise changing geographies of state-based power and state-based interventions in the latter part of 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism. Thus, it is with the understanding that every society produces its own space that Lefebvre's notion of heterotopia is applied to a non-urban, non-western setting. The Tarob mirrors Lefebvre's heterotopic concept, with the spirit's immaterial nature and existence everywhere and in the everyday creating cultural spaces of resistance. These spaces enable something different to the reductive deterministic and homogenising strictures of Malaysian identity. The abstraction of heterotopic space is simultaneously a medium of social actions, because it structures them; and is a product of those actions (Gottdiener, 1985, p. 128). Again, in Lefebvre's conception of a heterotopia there is a clear resonance with the immaterial abstraction of the mediascape – an increasingly relational scene now made up of social actions and products of those actions.

Laranjo, Erbite and Santos (2013, p. 16) observe that there are common folklores shared across many Asian identities and claim that this commonality of shared folklore is a rich source of community and cultural value. They position folklore as a heterotopia, arguing that in the cross-cultural intersections of Southeast Asian folk literature this commonality describes a Pan-Asian identity. Laranjo et al. note that UNESCO identify folklore as the totality of traditional-based creations of a cultural community, reflecting the community's cultural and

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, in his 1978 essay *Space and the State*, Henri Lefebvre correlates atomization with the pulverizing of conditions for social life noting that atomization is a key characteristic of the construction of a dominant space:

The dominant space is characterized by the following two elements: it imposes itself on those who threaten to pulverize the conditions for social life, and it forbids the transgressions that tend to produce a different space (whatever that might be). These two functions are correlated and yet conflictual. How can both atomization (pulverization) and transgression (supersession [depassement]) be prevented? (cited in Brenner & Elden 2009, p. 240)

social identity as well as its standards and values. As folklore is the expression of a community's cultural uniqueness and identity it serves as a space of convergence and divergence of beliefs and values (Laranjo et al., 2013, p. 17). Ramos (1969, p. 238) argues that folklores and cultures move beyond boundaries and converge through shared narratives and beliefs. An argument that further deepens the position that folklore constitutes a heterotopia that can serve to re-inscribe cultural identity.

In the film "We Don't Want To Forget How Our Ancestors Gathered Food," from the *Big Stories, Small Towns: Bonkgud-Namaus* project (Potter & Ilana, 2016), 51 year old Dusun man Geluing and a group of 'tough guys' – Geluing's two brother in laws, James and Welly and a friend Kuloi – head out into the hilly jungles around the villages of Bongkud-Namaus to hunt and gather food according to traditional ethnic Dusun practices. For Geluing this is important as he doesn't "want to forget how our ancestors gathered food," and this quote was taken as the title for the film featured on the *Big Stories: Bonkgud-Namaus* website (Potter & Ilana, 2016). Geluing acknowledges that with the convenience of local markets, this is now a hobby more than a hunt for survival, however, the importance of embodying traditional Dusun practices – knowing the food of the forest and preserving a link to his father and ancestry – is a key driver for Geluing. As they move through the forest collecting food and supplies for the night, Geluing and his 'boys' recount the importance of different elements of setting up camp. From cutting bamboo in a particular way for cooking rice, to the implicit memories attached to net fishing, "I was 9 years old when I started net casting... I followed my father then... even til now... I'm 51 now and I'm still following the traditional ethnic Dusun way of life." Geluing forages for the forest vegetable *dukuru* observing, "younger generations wouldn't know whether or not this could be eaten." For the group, the forest itself represents a liminal space beyond the confines of the contemporary world that they associate with markets and money. Recalling Baumann's (2015) reflections on demarcation of 'proper' spaces and as spaces where something mythic resides, in this case, the forest is a liminal site of both everyday cultural practices (fishing/camping) and of mythical creatures and ritual actions.

Having established the importance of the traditional practices of camping, hunting and gathering in the jungle, Geluing offers a small story that refers to Dusun lore – connecting the forest to the idea of myth and ritual. In the video, Geluing catches a small fish, no larger than his hand, in the net he has cast according to the teaching of his father. As he turns the fish in his hand he reminisces, "... Barob fish.... People used to say that this fish would swallow the moon... it's what Dusuns of old would eat." Geluing recalled that the spirit of the Tarob is in all such fish and the fish is just one form of the Tarob spirit. A *Kadamaian* (Dusun people based north of Mount Kinabalu) account of the origin story of the Tarob, which bears strong similarities to other accounts from Dusun people across the region, is that the Tarob goes to the *Ompuan* women when they are pounding *padi* (unhusked rice) in the sky.<sup>4</sup> The Tarob asks for some rice to eat, which the women give him, but they become revolted by his greed and tell him to go away and eat the moon. The Tarob then attempts to do so but the Dusun people,

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<sup>4</sup> The *Tompuan* or *Ompuan* are female spirits of fertility, vegetation and rice-growing. They are both incubi and succubi and responsible for sexual dreams. Some Dusun (those of *Kadamaian* and *Tombulion*) believe there are *Ompuan* in the heavens (Evans, 1953, pp.35-36).



seeing the moon disappearing, beat gongs and drums and chant to alert other spirits to the Tarob's actions. *Kinorohingan* hears the noise and scolds the Tarob. The Tarob vomits the moon from his mouth, as well as the rice he had eaten from the Ompuan. This rice falls on the mats of the Dusun women who had been chanting to the spirits and results in a good harvest. The Tarob thus has numerous forms, and the stories frame this spirit as a greedy and impulsive child. It should also be noted that the Tarob has ample opportunity in Dusun cosmology to fill its belly – with a separate moon, sun and stars in each of the seven heavens.

In terms of human access to these heavens – and the spirits and deities who reside in these heavens – this is reserved for priests (*Tabit*) and priestesses (*Bobolian*). It is important to note that Evans (1953, pp. 42-43) emphasises the centrality of women in the cosmological practices of the Dusun, “one of the curious features of Dusun religion is that nearly all major religious rites are performed by priestesses.” Luping (2013) also reports that according to legend it was a woman who met a spirit sent by the female deity to teach people about the rites and prayers (known as *rinait*) that enabled, amongst other things, access to heavenly and spiritual realms. In an article for the online Malaysian publication *The Daily Express*, Luping (2013) states that:

The spirit came every evening and called on anyone who can hear to come forward. This call was repeated... but no one was brave enough to come forward to meet the spirit, until one brave woman went out to meet the spirit in the dark. The spirit told the woman that it was sent to earth from "Hibabou" to teach the Kadazan the "rinait" of the Bobohizan of the past. The spirit told the woman that she had to come and meet him every evening on the same spot until she learned the "rinait". Thus, it was that the "rinait" prayers was [sic] learnt by heart by a woman who in turn passed the "rinait" to other women in the village... as it was a woman who came to meet the spirit teacher, all Bobohizan in Penampang was therefore women only.

Evans (1953) records that the Dusun priestess is sometimes termed *Bobolian* and in the Kadazan language the term is *Bobohizan*. The derivation of the word is said to be ‘bolian’ (buying), as many people come to buy the spiritual wares of the priestess. Interestingly, given this commercial framing of spiritual access, the Bobolian played a key role in the daily life of the Kadazandusun people before the influx of Christianity and capitalism – and the role of priestess is still present in many villages, regardless of the majority belief system. Bobolians often officiate ceremonies at festivals, including: ceremonies to appease rice spirits during the harvest festival of *Kaamatan*, or the set of rituals known as *Magavau*<sup>5</sup>, or appeasing skull spirits during *Magang* ceremonies.<sup>6</sup> Bobolians are also engaged to perform exorcisms, to read omens, to cast charms and even as soothsayers and fortune-tellers. As the primary link between the world of the ‘earth people’ (*Tatana*) and the heavens, the Bobolian plays a key role in traversing the liminal spaces between the two planes – summoning familiar spirits to descend to earth using a *saragundik* (kite) or channelling a spirit to speak through her mouth

<sup>5</sup> Barlocco (2011, p. 606) describes the Kaamatan (sometimes styled as Ka’amatan) festival as the annual rice harvest festival of the Kadazandusun people, noting these are essentially a celebration and assertion of identity. The Magavau ceremony is part of a set of rituals conducted by the *Bobolian* during the harvest festival to recover grains of rice lost during the harvest that carried spirits (*Bambaazon*) with them and therefore causing a scarcity of future crops (Gobile, 2006, p. 104).

<sup>6</sup> Magang ceremonies are described by Peter Phelan (1994) as ceremonies where people erect ‘monuments’ known as *Sininggazanak* to commemorate those who die childless.

(but, as Evans [1953, p. 45] notes, not entering her body). In turn, this non-corporeal spiritual 'speaking through' is reminiscent of another invisible, atomised medium of transmission that proved vital, not only to Kadazandusun cultural presentation, but to the creation of a sense of cultural identity in the transitional period towards a federated, post-colonial Malaysian of the early 1950s. Reid (1997) recalls the profound influence of Radio Sabah as soon as it began broadcasting Dusun language programming in 1954, noting that local language programmes did much to seed the notion that there was such a thing as a single group called Kadazandusun.

This story then conveys the idea of the forest as an example of a liminal space of everyday Dusun culture (under threat) as well as a mythical space. It illustrates the non-corporeal and atomised nature of spirits in Dusun culture, such as the Tarob. And, prefacing our next story of the sacred oath, the Bobolian can be understood as having a continuing and active role in manifesting a living connection to Dusun cosmography. While Reid (1997, p. 132) may describe Dusun culture as endangered and the role of the Bobolian as under threat, the following story illustrates that the Bobolian embodies a complex notion of liminal presence. This is a presence that is at once spiritual, mythical, non-corporeal, atomised, endangered, vibrant, essential and still present in the practices of rituals and ceremonies, and in the making of law, contracts and oaths. These rituals, ceremonies and laws inform and reinscribe Dusun history and culture, beyond a history delimited by English colonisers, Malaysian government, and corporations.

### **The sacred oath that eats people**

The second story shifts our understanding of the role of folklore as stories that connect familial, familiar and everyday cultural practices to place, towards an understanding of esoteric, atomised spirituality of culture and stories as is imbued in multiple forms and in multiple practices. This second story echoes the radical shift described by Lefebvre in his conception of heterotopia and speaks to the fragile, liminal place that the contemporary practice of traditional Dusun beliefs and cosmography occupy.

In this story, told by 76 year-old Repetoh Gantakag from Bongkud and 100 year-old Yusuf Sapangal from Namaus, the origins of the alliance between the villages of Bongkud and Namaus are described. All quotes in this section are taken from the video "Our Village Made a Sacred Vow" featured on the *Big Stories: Bongkud-Namaus* website (Potter & Ilana, 2016).

There was a pledge and agreement made in Bongkud village between the two villages of Bongkud and Namaus. Repetoh and Yusuf were both witnesses to this agreement. Repetoh describes it as follows, "only I and a few people witnessed (the agreement) at the time."

"People came from Namaus village to ask my father, the village Chief, for land because they didn't have farmlands." Repetoh's father said that Bongkud village would give Namaus people land on the other side of Bongkud village, but if the Bongkud people "were ever short" the people of Namaus must return the favour and give them land. In addition, the people of Namaus would have to move on to the gifted land. After Bali (the chief of Namaus at the time),



consulted with his village, they agreed to move some people across to the new, gifted land, with some Namaus residents remaining behind as they did not want their village to disappear entirely. Yusuf recalls that Namaus people settled in Bongkud in 1950 and “that’s when our villages made a sacred oath.”

Repetoh takes up the story again describing how a Bobolian was called to seal the oath, which included “No cheating, bothering other people’s wives or stealing land. No murder or mocking people here. Anyone who breaks these offenses will be ‘eaten’ by the sacred oath.” Yusuf reinforces Repetoh’s recollection of the oath. Repetoh goes on to describe the ritual for sealing the oath, notably sacrificing a buffalo and bleeding it onto the ground and onto stones that are made sacred by anointing them with blood. Repetoh goes on, “the sacrificed buffalo parts taken were its eyes, tail, mouth, tongue, ears. They were buried and a stone was crafted into the shape of a buffalo’s head. The Bobolian then performed a *rinait*.” The *rinait*, as noted earlier, are the rites and prayers that connect to heavenly and spiritual realms. Repetoh says of the *rinait*: “it’s very effective and no one is allowed to disturb the ritual.” Yusuf recalls that since 1967, there have been many houses built on the gifted land and all those living there are still bound by that sacred oath. Against the backdrop of rapid agricultural and national change this alliance is significant. Everyday life is suffused with the spirit of the sacred oath that has been consecrated by Bobolians and bled into the earth on which the lore is told and the law is enacted. It is significant as it is folk-law, a Dusun demarcation of space and community and cultural identity that is separate from the neo-liberal law and policies of the (West) Malaysian focussed government. The oath constitutes an act of good faith that ignores capitalist operations in the area – specifically those of the palm oil multi-national corporations who are increasingly decimating the region. In fact, the invocations of the Bobolian and the sustained presence of the sacred oath between two Dusun communities yield what could be framed as a ‘Dusun heterotopia’.

The section that follows offers a theoretical analysis that applies a heterotopic and agentive lens to the contemporary cultural practices of Dusun people, offering an alternate framework to much of the theory which problematizes, ‘others’, or endangers Dusun culture.<sup>7</sup> An example of this problem-centric literature can be seen in Anthony Reid’s (1997) article *Endangered Identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah (East Malaysia)* where the author catalogues a litany of threats to language and identity. The contours of power and agency shaped by the gatekeepers of economic and cultural identity in the region - large palm oil owners destroying natural habitats and traditional agricultural practices, and the Malaysian government making decisions around a homogenised 1Malay cultural policy from the distant shores of West Malaysia – closely resembles the Foucauldian concept of *heterotopia* (Foucault, 1986), as an inverse of a utopia. The asymmetrical relationship which existed and still exists between the core capitalist states of the former English colonial administration, and the Malaysian government and its multi-national corporate patrons next to their ‘peripheral’ state neighbours (such as Sarawak and Sabah), provides substance to Foucault’s structuralist reading of socio-spatial ‘othering’. However, as observed in Carabelli and Lubbock (2017), Foucault’s ‘heterotopia’ is unsystematised (see also Harvey, 2000, pp. 537-538; Hook, 2007, p. 182;

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<sup>7</sup> A detailed presentation of Sabahan engagement with the formation of a single Malaysian state is beyond the framework of this article. See Chin, 1997, for a summary of this history

Saldanha, 2008). It is for these reasons that I look to the 'heterotopia' described by Henri Lefebvre. The focus that Lefebvre gives to the notion of *agency* in the social construction of 'other' spaces augments Foucault's heterotopia, but – it must be made clear – it does not replace it. The use of Lefebvre's heterotopia (and thoughts on *autogestion*) helps to extend, rather than negate, Foucault's implicit understanding of agency, albeit from a more Marxist orientation. For Lefebvre, "social relations, including contradictions that give rise to class struggles, explain the state, not the other way round" (cited in Elden, 2004, p. 217). Thus, while both Foucault and Lefebvre saw the state as a fairly defined concentration of power relations, it was not somehow externally related to the society over which it governed, but merely represented the congealed site of society's contending groups and power capacities.

Carabelli and Lubbock (2017) go on to note that Lefebvre's heterotopia directly addresses the necessity of engaging the state as a means of realising a fuller role for *autogestion*, a form of self-managed, radical democracy in which social conflicts and struggles are innate as well as a measure of the vitality of the collective organisation that is the particular form of *autogestion*. As Lefebvre argued, "in a broader conception the modalities of *autogestion* may be proposed and imposed at all levels of social practice, including the agencies of coordination" (Lefebvre, 2009 [1966], p. 148). Lefebvre's vision of an alternative to the productivist world of commodification and capital accumulation entails development, instead of growth; a politics of difference, instead of state-imposed abstraction, homogeneity, and consumerism; and radical grassroots democracy, or *autogestion*, instead of technocracy and ruling class hegemony. Therefore, the everyday practices of Dusun culture and folklore can be understood as grassroots modes of *autogestion* that see the state as the site of their struggle. These everyday cultural practices of the Dusun people can be framed in terms of their location outside, or against, state-civil society, and as a means of directly challenging the main apparatuses of power that seek to impose specific rationalities benefitting only those elites who propagate them. At the same time, such practices enable the Dusun to maintain autonomy and freedom of action by actively building their own sites of heterotopic *autogestion*. As such, these practices resonate with Lefebvre's claim that "there are no ideas without a utopia" (1976, p. 34). The spaces of heterotopia that are opened through the reclamation of traditionally demarcated symbolic spaces, and the transformation of lore into law, speak to this utopian imagining. Thus, these imaginings recall traditional ideas of Dusun 'community' combined with new, liminal, mediums of transmission supporting increased participation by this group which identifies itself on the margin. These liminal transmissions recall Van Gennep's (1977 [1960]) second stage of a rite of passage. The second stage is an ambiguous state for the subject and highlighted as the liminal period of the rite of passage. Mitchell (2005, p.204) articulates this same idea that the core purpose of this second stage is to transfer the subject from the original site to a new site. In this way, the stories and folklores, their expression within everyday life and their remediation into new mediums of transmission, enable the potential amplification of what Reid (1997) describes as an "endangered identity" into an engaged, socio-cultural struggle.

## Conclusion

In applying this theoretical lens that is based in Lefebvrian concepts of heterotopia to Dusun culture, it is hoped that an alternate and agentive framework might be established. This framework is based in *autogestion*, emerging from the everyday cultural practices and stories of Dusun people, such as those observed in the *Big Stories, Small Towns: Bongkud-Namaus* project. It can be seen in Geluing's social, cultural excursions into the jungle. For Geluing and the 'tough guys', the importance of embodying and reinforcing traditional Dusun practices is a key driver. The group pro-actively seeks to reinforce the importance of traditional practices of being in the jungle. In his story, Geluing directly connects the forest to broader understandings of Dusun cosmology and culture. For Geluing and his friends, the forest is the embodiment of everyday Dusun culture, as well as a mythical space. The liminal space of the jungle, as well as the metaphor of the atomised spirit of the Tarob, as invoked by Geluing, can be seen as illustrative of the non-corporeal and atomised nature of Dusun culture itself. Similarly in the story of the sacred oath that binds the village of Bongkud and Namaus told by Yusuf and Repetoh we see a cultural act that ignores capitalist and statist operations in the area, radically shifting the geographical demarcation of the area according to the requirements of local people. The sustained presence of the sacred oath, which is sealed in blood, between two Dusun communities also yields a 'Dusun heterotopia'. These everyday cultural practices are framed in terms of their location outside, or against, Malaysian (non-Dusun) society. In addition, these practices enable Dusun people to maintain autonomy and freedom of action by actively building their own sites of heterotopic *autogestion*. The combination of a landscape (the forest), atomised spirits and oaths that are diffused into so many elements of everyday physical and cultural aspects of place, reflects the diffused, atomised overlapping nature of transmedia. A key idea to return to is that these overlapping, liminal spaces need not be positioned simply as endangered. Rather, as I observe in the introduction to this article, it can be a way to move beyond what is seen in order to consider a way of seeing or being in the world. These spaces might be empowered through their liminal nature and enable opportunities for shaping memory and culture. Thus, by remediating these stories across a range of media from online on the [www.bigstories.com.au](http://www.bigstories.com.au) to the Malaysia-wide distribution of the project and the Dusun language stories,<sup>8</sup> we see potential to enable this wider society, encompassing the entirety of this imagined country of Malaysia, to develop opportunities for a more nuanced reflection and understanding of its own cultural diversity. The parallel conceptions of the liminal aspects of Dusun spirits and stories and the diffused and atomised idea of transmedia are combined.

While theorists such as Evans and Van Gennep may have created a divide between ceremony, ritual and everyday practices – specifically Van Gennep (1977 [1960]) in his conception of 'framing' – the notion that purely local, spiritual, ceremonial actions might take

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<sup>8</sup> The stories have been screened at a range of film festivals internationally. In Malaysia, the festivals have been screened at Borneo Eco Film Festival, Freedom Film Festival, George Town Literary Festival, Johor Batu Arts Festival as well as screening partnerships with MyDocs Malaysia, FINAS Malaysia, Urbanscapes and The Daily Seni. In addition, the project, the project launch and the stories have received wide media interest. The highest viewed online video on the project was produced by r.Age Malaysia, with over 1350,000 views in April, 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/thestarRAGE/videos/10154926484449741/>

on wider resonance that can echo throughout a culture, society, or nation, can be understood to be embodied in this atomised idea of the sacred. And this idea is transmitted through folklore into law as well as into the shaping and creating of liminal spaces where we understand the emergence and convergence that is embodied in the ambiguity of that space as an extraordinary freedom. A freedom that, as Turner (1974, p. 216) declares enables us “to juggle with the factors of existence.”

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