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Inside the Treehouse: 
Ethnographic Musings on an Architectural Research in Korowai, Southern Papua

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of narratives in (re)shaping human-environment relations as well as development agenda. This work is inspired by my research in 2017 on the traditions and daily life of the Korowai communities residing in neglected development areas in Southern Papua, Indonesia. My reflection during an architectural research tells that the Indonesian government efforts on cultural conservation there overlap with tales of hopes and betrayals brought by development. In response to their historical disappointment, Korowai people developed a different narratives on the government, the settlement construction, tourism, and other “modern” interventions imposed on them. I argue the treehouse-related narratives employed by the current development initiatives in Korowai have contributed to continuation of cultural appropriation, the “noble savage” portrayal, and economic inequality. Drawing from the Korowai people's mythical past as tree people, ones created and maintained by external entities, I emphasize the critical importance of understanding the diverse environmental narratives for research engagement in development settings. By focusing on this particular encounter, this paper promotes a reciprocal collaborative understanding between government entities, experts, and communities in research and development engagements.

Keywords: Treehouse, Narrative, Reflection, Development, Korowai.

Introduction

This article aims to examine the crucial role of environmental narratives within the context of development planning. Often function as preliminary indicators, these accounts shape assumptions and guide initiatives, providing a framework for development agenda. As illustrated by Paul Jepson (2019), narratives serve as conduits that aid our comprehension of the diverse and complex facets of nature. He further posits that these rhetoric simplify our grasp of the world's condition, its implications for humanity, and the necessary measures to address these issues. Often, such narratives act as catalysts, inspiring human involvement in reshaping the environment through various means, including development schemes. The discourse on sustainable tourism in Korowai promoted by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy in Indonesia (Kemenparekraf 2011) might serve as a salient example of such a scheme. It asserts that a harmonious balance between economy, culture, and the environment, under the “preserving nature, developing local” banner, justifies the development of sustainable tourism.
there. Through the stories from treehouses in southern Papua, Indonesia, I will illustrate how persistent desire to sustain the stories of “primitive” and their future influence how Korowai people reconfigure their environment and community.

Focusing on the ways Korowai people encounter tourism/development strategies, I explore how stories about the environment are created, disseminated, and countered. I am linking this seemingly omnipotent narratives to a concept Tania Li (2011: 99) introduces as “rendering technical,” a set of practices concerned with portraying “the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics.” These practices involve expert interventions to design specific governance scheme that requires a rationale to identify problems and systematically connects them to solutions. In The Will to Improve (2007), Li highlights the role of narratives in development schemes. Specifically, she views experts' narratives as central to what she terms “government” – the effort to influence actions, establishing conditions to guide conduct along approved pathways. In Li's observation, this phenomenon occurs through a series of mediations in the production and reproduction of narratives. These narratives provide a rationale for determining how experts must intervene to secure and enhance the community's inherent goodness. However, my observation tells that sometimes the dominant narratives predetermine and situate the experts' roles. Additionally, the complexity of the research process occasionally yields counternarratives based on the contextual mode of “otherness” (Stasch 2016). By various ways Korowai people live the narratives, I offer that the governed people can also render the government as intelligible and calculable entity.

In the following sections, I will firstly explore the role of environmental narratives in understanding the complex relationship of humans and the environment, in relation to Korowai people, their treehouses, and the lingering developmental logic imposed on them. The subsequent section discusses my reflection on the cultural architectural research processes that tells about the (re)production of the Korowai's mythical past. I then proceed by explaining Korowai people's perceptions about development as a unique form of "otherness," emphasizing the complexity of narrative production. In conclusion, the article considers how certain tourism-induced depictions may reveal intentions to reshape the environment to suit external needs rather than community interests. This understanding offers a perspective on the current development agendas in Indonesia that certain environmental narratives might perpetuate inequality.

Environmental Narratives: Problems with Delineations

In the midst of the Korowai forest, I found the food supplies dwindling. Observing my anxious expression, a Korowai tried to assure by saying, “don’t worry, we can rely on the forest. I can hunt the pigs, moles, and gurame Toraja.”

"Gurame Toraja?"

“Yes, Toraja. Now the Indigenous fish has been replaced by the Toraja carp.”

(author’s fieldnote, 2017)

1 “Gurame Toraja” is a term used by the Korowai people to refer to a perceived invasive fish species originate from the Toraja region in Sulawesi. “Gurame” (Osphronemus goramy) are common freshwater inhabitants in Southeast Asia.
Korowai people are often portrayed as an isolated and underdeveloped community on the periphery of plantation, industry, and development efforts. However, during my research with the Korowai near the Becking river, I started to see things differently. I was hired by the Ministry of Public Works and Housing research team as an “anthropologist” whose role was mainly to observe and describe the social-cultural aspects about the construction of the treehouses. I found that the images of the Korowai as a foraging society shaped the research's direction. The food supplies situation I narrated earlier led to questions: How does one address the disappearance of Indigenous fish due to foreign carp expansion? How should the story be framed within the mythical past of Korowai?.

That kind of logic demonstrates how the methodology can overlook information that may not be easily classified as data, especially when exploring the neglected areas of state development. In such instances, researchers might struggle to articulate how the Korowai people perceive subtle cultural or social changes. Here, I argue that environmental narratives provide a means to reconcile these ambiguities, enabling a more nuanced exploration of complexity and dynamics within research, despite the limitations of conventional research methods.

Environmental narratives are stories that help us comprehend the relationship between humans and the environment. But, these stories can be intricate and paradoxical. Grove (1992) delves into this complexity, identifying the primary conflicts between colonial enterprise, Romantic Idealism, and scientific discoveries. Through the lens of an "untouched tropical island" and a Western vision of utopia, he examines how colonial conservationists advocated this image as an idea. Ironically, even as scientists acknowledged the need to protect natural resources and manage the use of land, they also supported actions that perpetuated colonial exploitation. His historical examination encompasses moral, economic, and scientific rationales, and highlights the irony in the implementation of measures meant to balance human economic interests with natural protection. Despite the growing recognition that Western economic development poses a long-term threat to humanity's survival (especially through colonialism), Grove's work reveals the irony that states often act against environmental degradation only when their economic interests are at stake. He argues that relying solely on philosophical ideas, science, Indigenous knowledge, and species conservation is insufficient to stimulate effective decision-making processes.

Grove's (1992) study informs how the desire to manipulate the environment occurs in conflicting the desire for both protection and exploitation. The moral obligation to achieve balance is viewed as the ideal intervention. However, problems arise due to the inherent structure of environmental narratives, which tend to oversimplify complex issues and often favor specific perspectives and agendas based on individual interests. This, in turn, marginalizes local knowledge and alternative solutions. Fairhead and Leach (1995), in their research on historical savannahs in Guinea, explore the underlying assumptions that often shape social science analyses. They argue that narratives serve as foundational assumptions, gaining strength and credibility primarily through their interconnectedness, dissemination, and consolidation within broader narratives. These are compelling stories that present seemingly unquestionable logic, furnished scripts, and justifications for developmental actions.
For example, Fairhead and Leach (1995) challenge the widely accepted narrative that attributes the formation of savannah and deforestation to local deforestation activities. Their counter-narrative provides evidence that savannah has existed in the region for centuries and was actually created and maintained by local communities. This contrasting narrative emphasizes the importance of understanding local knowledge and practices to gain a thorough grasp of the complex relationship between people and the environment. Why is it crucial to critically examine our comprehension and understanding of the human-environment relationship within narratives, rather than accepting them as unquestioned truths?

Fairhead and Leach (1995) contend that environmental degradation is not solely the result of Malthusian concerns or the alleged incapability of the local communities. Rather, it can stem from institutional breakdown, involving the transfer of control to state structures and the rise of unregulated enterprises. This process develops alternative assumptions that align narratives with empirical evidence. Efforts to construct alternative assumptions regarding widely accepted narratives are motivated by the recognition that environmental narratives often rely on Western assumptions and stereotypes. Furthermore, Fairhead and Leach (1995) criticize this approach for offering a simplistic view, hindering dialogue and comprehension, and prioritizing specific perspectives while disregarding local knowledge.

I agree with Fairhead and Leach (1995) that we must sidestep oversimplification of complex situations by giving appropriate attention to environmental narratives. In Indonesia, as I experienced, environmental narratives significantly influence the rationale behind developmental projects. Li (2007: 124) emphasizes this situation in one of the gaps between “the world conveyed in texts and the world to be transformed,” which often concentrated on idealized concepts of community while neglecting present realities. She explains that "communities have a secret to a good life, yet experts must intervene to secure and enhance that goodness" (Li, 2011: 101). However, as Li points out, this well-intentioned obligation contains a paradox: attempts to govern through community often disregard present realities in favor of idealized visions of the community. This intention frequently results in ambiguity about whether expert discussions about communities are referring to their current, future, or mythical past. To further complicate matters, experts often romanticize a past version of a "noble savage" community that should be restored, suggesting that interventions aim to revert the community to its so-called natural state.

My research on the Korowai people sheds light on the challenges in recognizing their landscape transformation due to developmental efforts. Korowai local tales often occupy a subordinate position, treated as a mythical representation of the past. To contest such a scheme, I consider local stories as a potential alternative for marginalized voices. I reflected on a series of data collection activities centered on predictable behaviors, such as the encounters between foreign tourists and the Korowai, which often reinforce existing stereotypes. However, it became clear that the current categorization frameworks are not adequate to fully capture all the nuances encountered. delved on my notes on Korowai people hope, loss, and betrayal that arose during the fieldwork. These narratives provide insights into the often overlooked aspects of development processes. My research engagement then shows Korowai people beyond exoticism caricature of foraging communities and, more importantly, on their responses to tourism/development schemes.
Portrayed Tourism and Mythical Past

Korowai people are often presented to audiences through photographs of the towering treehouses within the vast pristine jungle, leading to a desire to experience the “living with the cannibals” phenomenon. This allure has stimulated an ongoing demand for tourism, which the circulated stories and visuals for tourism reproduce narrative of the Korowai's "primitivism" to maintain an aesthetic depiction of an exotic foraging community (Stasch 2014).

The Korowai people first made contact with the outside world in the 1970s and subsequently adapted to touristic life introduced by the Indonesian government (van Enk and de Vries 1997). Thereafter, tourism was recognized as integral to the construction and appropriateness of Korowai cultural identity. It positioned the Korowai in a multifaceted relationship with tour agents, foreign tourists, and the global stage, while simultaneously acting as a guardian of Korowai traditions. A porter who worked for a tour company in the early 1990s provides insights into the process:

"In the beginning, there were Sumatra-gentleman and Maluku-nice 2 men who used to be familiar with the village elders [note: the first generation of Kombay-Koroway who settled in the village]. They arrived in the villages and the jungle. I've seen them since I was a child, and they were already close to the elders before they brought tourists. They only brought tourists [a

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2 “Sumatra” (island in Western part of Indonesia) and “Maluku” (an archipelagic region in Eastern Indonesia) here are terms used by locals to identify the origins of the people who are considered as initiators of tourism service in Korowai.
few years later]. I was taught to help [work with the tour agency] when I was a child because there used to be many parties [tourism activities] in my village." (Research interview, 2017).

Tourism activities within Korowai community require the mediation of external actors such as tourism service providers. The remote location limits the possibility of spontaneous or mass tourism. Intermediaries then need to arrange tourists visit to the community, communicate the plan with local contact. Later, foreign tourists will spend approximately one week living with the Koroway family in a bolup—a garden where a family lives. They engage in traditional bolup activities like hunting, sago tapping, crafting accessories, sleeping in treehouses, and participating in the sago festival, as described by a group leader:

"No. Tourists do not rush into the bolup. Mr. Sumatra-gentleman informed us [from outside Korowai settlement] a long time before. You are in charge of this, the celebration, and the tall house. Tourists will arrive on a later date, which will not be until next year or soon. You should be prepared because we were informed that this is a village festival. Tourists often request this. They want to go hunting in traditional attire, make sago, or venture into the jungle, and finally attend the sago party the next day. Every tourist wants to know about our traditions" (Research interview, 2017).

During fieldwork for architectural research I was involved, this imagery was consistently conveyed in researchers technical text and documentations. As a multidisciplinary research team, the fieldwork was conducted by architectural and land planning experts with the endorsement by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Public Housing. The dominant theme at the time was "preserving nature, developing locally," a sentiment that was echoed in the initial research preparation meetings with the ministry officials. I observed that this kind of research tends to reaffirm "culture preservation," believing that meanings, customs, and materials are static and can restore themselves.

The research led by architectural team with the primary focus on architecture and culture related to traditional housing construction, imposed certain limitations on the range of activities and data to be collected. My role, meanwhile, was to explore the “socio-cultural background,” focusing on tradition, culture, and activities connected with traditional buildings. During the early weeks of fieldwork, the team examined the meaning, form, and construction methods of traditional dwellings. They identified three types of houses: the Bivak House (Xaum), the Tall House (Xaim), and the Treehouse (Luop). The three types of homes were constructed using materials from the surrounding area by kin groups, either by core family members or with the assistance of close relatives. We observed that men were responsible for laying the foundation, assembling various materials, and connecting various elements up to the roof installation, while women assisted in gathering materials and food.

The data collection itself has become part of a discursive formation concerning the mythical past of Korowai society and life. The research team felt that their work was morally embedded within the reality of the locale. On the other hand, the locals viewed the research team's literal interpretation as a codification of their unique and uninterrupted way of life as an isolated foraging society. Furthermore, the research activities that produced a series of drawings, designs, information, models, and stories, among other things, served not only as
documentation but also proposed a continuum of development and a representation of the Korowai’s way of life. One informant stated that after the first contact between the Korowai and the outside world, the only path forward for the Korowai society was to evolve into a "bigger" society; one capable of welcoming external influences without abandoning their traditional way of life.

By chance, the research team's translations echoed the framework of the mythical past of the Korowai society. The image of locals preserving nature through their cultural capabilities became a dominant influence in the research work and the participatory process. The relationship between the research team and the informants evolved, fostering a mutual literal interpretation. The locals expected the research team to transpose all of their knowledge and practices into readable technical documents. In a peculiar way, the locals believed that this translation process could serve as a catalyst, encouraging them to restore and maintain their community in anticipation of future tourism development.

Figure 2. Measuring the Treehouse for Architectural Technical Guidelines
Source: Puslitbang Pemukiman, 2017

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This framework is a mythical past (Fairhead and Leach 1995) that underpins the continuation of popular Western conceptions of traditional societies. Such a Korowai myth becomes increasingly convincing for the researcher team, as if it is actually indispensable for human and environmental sustainability. Taking into account the external factors that cause environmental degradation, foraging activities as part of tourism attraction is seen as a problem-solving strategy by the government—an appeal to the moral image of local people who can manage their environment; an exotic portrayal of noble cannibals who preserve their habitat.

Initially, the research team perceived the Korowai as a community that sustains its unique way of life by building houses in trees, earning them the monikers "tree people" or "warrior tribe" (van Enk and de Vries 1997). However, as our fieldwork progressed in the subsequent weeks, our worldview on Korowai people unraveled. We started to pay attention to state initiatives and document diverse accounts about Korowai experiences with the government. We observed how Korowai people, as Stasch (2016) argues, actively exercised their ideas about social life to the new structures, people, and hierarchies. With this emerging idea, we were no longer focused solely on efforts to preserve tradition.

**Otherness of Other: The Government as Subject of Stories**

After spending two weeks with the Korowai people, our study team developed a closer relationship with the community. The Korowai recognized that we, as researchers, were distinct from regular visitors. They paid a close attention to differing attributes of strangers among them. The Korowai referred to each team member as "habian," meaning head or boss, while addressed the ministry representative (who was part of the team) as "habian-habian," signifying the head of heads. I perceived the act of naming to be significant, as it facilitated deeper insights for the researchers into what the Korowai regard as highly authentic. Moreover, the Korowai emphasized that not everyone is granted the privilege to be invited to the "bolup"—a term originally used to describe garden and family settlements, but now, interpreted by some Korowai as referring to ancestral lands. These lands are situated beyond the new settlement village, representing a sacred space imbued with the legacy of their ancestors. A Korowai clan then welcomed the research team to their bolup to stay among the them and observe the treehouse construction. Knowing that the team had limited resources to fund the construction of a “real treehouse,” they created a mock-up version to comfort us. They considered this as unique opportunity that even tourists would not experience.
As we built the mock-up treehouse and discussed their architectural traditions, the Korowai shared a contrasting narrative about their place and how they encountered the new settlement, a kampung or village that was built by missionaries and the Indonesian government. They expressed that the perceived primitiveness continues because the government failed to provide the promised settlement. This conversation on settlement is apparently central when it comes to Korowai people and outsider’s interventions.

One of the informants told a particular origin story. He recalls from his childhood that the first contact occurred through missionary outreach by dropping unreadable flyers, tools, and food from the sky (see also van Enk and de Vries 1997). At first, they were frightened by the unfamiliar sounds and materials, but driven by curiosity to engage in a new type of encounter, the Korowai people were later willing to interact further. This contact with a stranger was described in a mystical manner. Informants said in the past before the first contact happened the Korowai people were dispersed in numerous small-band hidden in the jungle. He described the Korowai realm as a land of chaos at that time. Every family was against each other. Warfare was a daily activity. Kidnapping and killing caused a number of people to flee into the forest and build the treehouses. The khakhua (witch) also constantly terrorized them with the silent threat of death at the homes of Korowai. The missionaries and Indonesian government later introduced the promising ideas of communal living with the prosperity and materials that the Korowai had never seen before.

Since then, the Korowai people have encountered multiple efforts to integrate them into "modern" expectations. In conversations, what caught their attention was not the story of the village’s progressive development that prospers its inhabitants but the increasingly unattainable promises of prosperity and material gains from the village. They reflected on how the new settlement appears as a sphere where, according to informants, the Korowai people gradually
assimilated the infrastructure left by the missionaries and the state, integrating it with their fragmented land ownership and their very lives. For the Korowai, the centripetal mode of the new settlement underwent reorganization within a new interdependent structure. After the missionaries left in 1990, the Indonesian government established an administrative center in Kouh, Boven Digul. These encounters inspired transformations in how the Korowai perceive and interact with their environment, and, more importantly, in their position within the wider society. Accordingly, in the 1990s, Indonesia implemented settlement programs for the Korowai people, including land-use planning, infrastructure development, health and education standards, and social assistance. The establishment of this statecraft was perceived as being closely tied to their self-perception as a unified ethnic group, rather than individual clans transforming into state citizens. Despite speaking of their engagement with a new way of life, the Korowai viewed the early phase of life adaptation in the new settlement by the Indonesian government as a disruptive shift in the orderly transformation of the clan's presence, which was formerly dispersed. For the first time, the Korowai lived as close neighbors. This proximity altered how they identified others. The mode of living together, introduced by the new settlement, has become a basis for the contemporary use of the term “Korowai,” but it has also instigated stories of losing their past as small foraging families in their uncharted land.

Becoming Korowai in a new settlement tells a different point of view. When we compare this with the theme of the mythical past, we find that stories of the new settlement often begin with a phrase such as, "the missionaries left and the Indonesian government ignored the village," as stated by the informant. Unified as a population within an administrative area, they were lured by promises and threats, only to find themselves in a situation of abandonment. The promised public utilities were supposed to usher in a new source of life, but in reality, they more often than not failed to materialize. They become nothing but silent ruins. In line with that settling process, the feeling of being "abandoned" in the new settlement embodied abstract ideas about new actors, materials, promises, and betrayals. Tourists and their agents became the actors fulfilling the promises of a new way of life. The previously abandoned "bolup" transformed into a place that offered food, money, security, and intimacy in relationships. Meanwhile, actors such as the state apparatus, who had initially conveyed those promises, or even our research team, gradually left the place. What remained were memories of broken promises and a deep-seated sense of betrayal.
The story of promises made and broken by those in power not only uncovers the existence of primitive transcendence (Stasch 2016) but also, in my opinion, aims to reveal the nature of power as a sensory object. This was observed during the research period. When the Korowai people had the opportunity to interact face-to-face with a state representative, they expressed their agitation towards those who have broken their promises. The Korowai articulated their feelings about living in new settlements; they perceived their new dwelling as nothing more than a place of solace and imagination, a refuge from past violent conflicts among kin groups—a place entangled in a web of unfulfilled expectations.

The emic portrayal of encounters within the new settlement features stories that cannot foster a discursive space where the desires of the state and the local community align. I recall that the ministry researchers were perplexed about how to translate this version of the story, even when it came to drafting guidelines for gathering data in the ongoing research. "The Korowai seem to have learned to conform to the researchers' expectations without truly being heard," one researcher noted. The framework of the mythical past becomes an obstacle to reconcile the romanticized discordant story between the natives and their environment with the experts’ work. Looking back on that moment, I understand that turning the crossroads of narratives and state allegories into a discursive tool was challenging. The Korowai recognized that their aspirations for "growth" or becoming "big" in the future required a rationalization that embraces conventional technicalities. However, translating their feelings of abandonment and addressing the prevailing sense of inequality proved challenging due to the prevailing belief that the community's image could potentially foster the ability to manage change.

Our approach in handling stories warrants careful consideration. Bury (2005) contends that the collection of stories, somewhat ironically, might inadvertently foster the rewriting of Indigenous narratives, potentially paving the way for neoliberal land reforms and shifts in livelihoods. My research indicates that the Korowai's experiences, as illustrated through their point of view about settling and adapting to new life configurations, offer critical perspectives

Figure 4. An Example of New Settlement Designed By State
Source: Author, 2017
on how development initiatives ought to regard stories as vital instruments in shaping community dynamics. The recurring themes of promises and betrayals in everyday encounters can explain the changing perceptions of their relationship with the environment. This narrative approach counters the idea that Indigenous peoples are merely objects of scrutiny in the exploration of their own cultures (see Alatas 1977). Rather, it showcases the potential for Indigenous narratives to serve as a platform for critiquing governmental actions and policies. Pursuing alternative explanation, especially those stemming from the repercussions of the state's technical rendering processes, offers a fresh avenue for challenging the intentional misrepresentation of “the other.” This perspective is particularly pertinent for researchers who often positioned as collectors of stories.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the research conducted in Korowai in 2017, it becomes clear that narratives are situated at the intersection of several elements. In addition to the ethical turn and the discipline's moral obligations (Gow 2002), there are textual content, rhetorical forms, meaning, and authorial authority (Clifford 1983). Narratives, like what I have observed from inside the treehouse, significantly impact the technical rendering process by guiding the way we navigate or conceptualize specific environmental layouts. My paper delineates how a distinct narrative structure can shape the narrator's perspective in articulating their version of the events. The underlying issues within these narratives themselves warrant further elaboration. To a certain extent, the portrayal of human-environment relationships hinges upon the intended structuring themes. Complexity then escalates when the suggested thematic framework of the narrative dictates the approach to rendering techniques, influencing not only moral and instrumental criteria but also dictating which stories merit attention. Understanding the various stories in Korowai is not merely about questioning authenticity, but facilitates a deeper exploration of the issues that may arise if planning schemes are not sensitive to the problem’s intricacies. By focusing on the imperativeness of story, jargon, or myth for governing efforts, this article highlights that proliferating certain narratives in development settings might result in persistent inequality in Indonesia.

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