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Narrative inquiry, creative nonfiction and two braided stories of the rehabilitation and release of orang-utans in Sebuyau, Sarawak

Abstract:

The rehabilitation and release of captive orang-utans remains a contentious issue in the conservation of the endangered species. In the 1970s, three confiscated and captive-raised orang-utans were released at Sebuyau, Sarawak: using narrative inquiry as the research method, the researcher–writer tells the stories of two people instrumental in this experiment. Their stories tell of personal experience working with the rescued animals and the consequences of well-meaning but ill-fated human actions. In this creative nonfiction work, the voices of the wildlife officer, forest guard and researcher–writer take the reader through a gamut of emotions: wonder, compassion, frustration and sorrow. This writing is part of the researcher–writer's postgraduate work using creative nonfiction to tell the stories of men and women working to conserve the orang-utan over a span of fifty years in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo.

Biographical note:

Christina Yin lives in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. A former broadcast journalist, news anchor, columnist and communications officer for a conservation organisation, Christina is a Senior Lecturer at Swinburne University of Technology, Sarawak Campus, also undertaking her PhD studies at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. Her fiction and nonfiction writing have appeared in *Anak Sastra* and *eTropic Journal*, among others.

Keywords:

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‘On arrival, please release.’

Banggan Empulu reads the words on the cigarette paper that Thulu Ayu hands him. These are his instructions then. He has spent the past three months in Ulu Sebuyau, a forested area known to be an orang-utan habitat located in the Sri Aman and Samarahan divisions on the western part of Sarawak. Here, he has bought wood, wire and metal, employed some local villagers to help make the three cages for the young orang-utans, and still others to help track a trail in the forest to a site prepared for their release. The rescued orang-utans, deemed to have been rehabilitated at Semenggoh Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre, arrive by helicopter courtesy of the Royal Malaysian Air Force and these are the instructions … on a piece of cigarette paper! But he is a forest guard, the lowest ranked staff in the Sarawak Forest Department. The instructions are from the Wildlife Officer who came from Hong Kong to take up the post of Assistant Conservator in the mid-1970s.

The three young orang-utans are carried down from the helicopter on the make-shift helipad behind the primary school Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan (National Primary School) Padawan. They have been sedated for the journey and are still groggy in their small cages. The longhouse people have come to help. They are very curious.

Why are the orang-utans coming to our village?

Why are the orang-utans in the helicopter? We cannot fly in the helicopter but the orang-utans can.

They help to carry the orang-utans, each in a small cage. One villager, Sambang, can carry a cage by himself, but the others are carried by two people sharing the burden. They are carried to a boat, and after about half an hour on the water, it’s time to carry the orang-utans on foot again. Banggan leads the way. He finds the trail near Bukit Keladan and the group sets out to the chosen site.

When they reach the site, the animals are still groggy, so the group camps overnight. In the morning, Banggan gives the young animals bananas, papayas and sweet potatoes he has bought in the village. Then he opens the cages. Bullet, Seduku and Banggan – the female orang-utan named after him – are released. The animals disappear into the forest. Over the next three days, the young orang-utans return sporadically to the cages. Though the Wildlife Officer told him simply ‘on arrival, please release,’ Banggan leaves fruit by the cages. The young orang-utans eat the fruit and then amble back to the trees. After the third day, they don’t come back. They have either found an abundance of fruit in the forest, or are lost. There is no way to know.

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This is the story that I was told by different people – forest guards and officers, wildlife biologists and conservationists who worked in the National Parks and Wildlife Office, or with conservation NGOs in Sarawak – and which I read about in old newspaper articles during my research into orang-utan conservation in the state. In the early 1970s, an injured orphaned baby orang-utan is brought to Dr Daniel Kok. He’s not a vet, but he is the only doctor in town who will treat any of the wild animals that are rescued or confiscated. Dr Kok removes the shotgun pellets from the baby orang-utan’s scalp. The

infant orang-utan survives and is named Bullet, cared for by the doctor's American wife, Elizabeth, in their house on a hill at Batu Lintang.

In 1975, Semenggoh Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre (now renamed Semenggoh Wildlife Centre) is established. Confiscated animals like hornbills, gibbons, and proboscis monkeys are brought to the wildlife centre to be rehabilitated. When he is a few years old, Bullet joins them. His one-time companion and fellow orang-utan orphan at the Koks' home, Archie, is also transferred from the Wildlife Officer's home to Semenggoh.

A while later, Seduku is brought to Semenggoh. Named after the place of her birth in Sri Aman district, she was bought for RM80. In fact, the forest guard, Banggan, gives the RM80 to placate the young man who claims the orang-utan as his own. He is furious that Banggan wants to take her from him. The forest guard tells the young man that the orang-utan is weak; she will die if she doesn't get the proper food and treatment. Banggan is well aware that he is not supposed to pay for the animals he confiscates, but the young man is angry. He uses an axe to cut up the post in the *langkau,* a shed where farmers or hunters will stop to rest, sometimes overnight. 'If you take my orang-utan, I will kill you,' the young man says. Banggan offers him RM80; it's all he has. In the end, the angry young man has to give up the orang-utan. The forest guard has the authority of the government behind him.

The last of the trio, Banggan, is named for the same forest guard who retrieves her from Rumah Bengap Musim, a longhouse in Batang Ai, an area known to be home to a relatively large orang-utan population. In the 1980s, the area was gazetted as a national park, and it now enjoys visitors who seek the chance to see orang-utans in the wild. But at the time when Banggan the orang-utan is rescued, there is little awareness among the longhouse people about the conservation of wildlife, in particular of endangered species such as the orang-utans. Hence, when the orphaned orang-utan is found, she is simply being kept as a pet.

Telling me this story Banggan, the forest guard, explains that he doesn't know what happened to the mother, but the longhouse people had found and kept the defenceless young orang-utan, and didn't know what to feed her. The local Forest Department staff had notified the headquarters in Kuching about the young animal, and so Banggan was asked to travel to Batang Ai to bring her back. When he reached the longhouse, Banggan asked to see the orang-utan. She was in poor condition. The longhouse folk had not known how to care for her, so when Banggan asked them if he could take the orang-utan, they said yes.

'She was female but because I brought her all the way from Batang Ai to Semenggoh, she was named after me. It was the Wildlife Officer who gave her my name,' Banggan explains with a laugh. The young orang-utan thrived at Semenggoh. 'She was beautiful, with very shiny, bushy hair,' Banggan tells me.

Hearing stories like these spurred me to research further the people who worked in the conservation of orang-utans in Sarawak. I had heard the story of the failed attempt to rehabilitate and reintroduce the three young orang-utans at Ulu Sebuyau from my husband, who has worked as a forester, wildlife biologist, and conservationist in the

orang-utan habitats in Sarawak for over three decades. The story had captured my imagination: the three orphaned orang-utans, separately rescued and raised in captivity, a semi-wild existence in a nature reserve, and the release in an attempt to rehabilitate them in an area where other orang-utans roamed and lived in a pocket of Sarawakian rainforest.

Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the two key people involved in the release attempt, I hoped to learn their stories of lived experience, knowing the stories would merge, for they both spoke of working together on orang-utan surveys and, in particular, of being participants in the story of the rehabilitation and release of the three young orang-utans in Sebuyau back in the 1970s.

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The Wildlife Officer has plans. He hopes to set up a habitat management program around the edges of the Lanjak Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary and a rehabilitation centre near Gunung Lesong in Sri Aman division. He thinks about Archie, the young orang-utan who lived with him for two years 'in a cage at the back of the house.' There had been nowhere else for young orphaned Archie to stay. Dr Kok's house was a literal menagerie and so the Wildlife Officer had taken Archie in.

Every morning, before he left for work, he would visit Archie in his cage, bring him his breakfast and watch the young orang-utan eat some bananas and papayas. Archie enjoyed the rambutans and durians during their fruiting season when they were plentiful and cheap. At around two years of age, Archie was taken to Semenggoh Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre. He was judged to be old enough and ready to be released, and taught how to find fruit for himself in the wild forested area. Feeding times were carried out twice a day at Semenggoh, and Archie returned to the feeding areas to eat his fill of the fruit. He learnt to use the vines and branches to slowly sway through the trees till he reached the fruit left on the wooden boards.

Even then, the Wildlife Officer and Archie still had a bond. 'We had this trust thing,' he tells me. 'I'd take his finger and put his knuckle between my teeth and bite and he'd take my finger and bite.'

It is with Archie in mind, and all the other orang-utans that have been rescued and trained to thrive in a semi-wild state, that the Wildlife Officer hatches a plan to find them a home in the wild, away from the feeding routine at the platforms in Semenggoh Wildlife Centre.

At a British Council function in Kuching, he meets an air vice-marshal in the Malaysian Royal Air Force telling stories about dropping off food and supplies at Gunung Mulu National Park. The Wildlife Officer explains his plans to set up a rehabilitation centre at Gunung Lesong in Sri Aman Division and to release orang-utans from Semenggoh on the outskirts of Lanjak Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary. He tells the air vice-marshal, 'I'm looking for help to move orang-utans in cages out into the forest because I have plans for a rehabilitation centre in the swamp forest.' Happily, the air vice-marshal is very obliging and helpful.

So, arrangements are made with the Royal Malaysian Air Force and soon helicopters are at his disposal. The Wildlife Officer is very excited and is on the verge of implementing his planned rehabilitation centre at Gunung Lesong, and the release of orang-utans at Lanjak Entimau. When I hear about this, I ask about the orang-utans that were taken out to be released at Ulu Sebuyau.

He replies, 'No, we didn't get that far. I was sabotaged. That's all I can say.'

Soon after, the Wildlife Officer is offered a job with a non-governmental organisation in Indonesia, and he leaves Sarawak. He is to return nearly four decades later to live in Kuching through the Malaysia, My Second Home program, and that is when he meets me, and shares his stories.

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Although the Wildlife Officer has instructed Banggan to simply release the young orang-utans, the forest guard tries to monitor their movements. When they no longer return to the cages to feed on the fruit left for them, Banggan gathers the other forest guards and longhouse folk he had employed to help carry the orang-utans to the site. They start searching for the young orang-utans but are not successful; Ahmad Engan, one of the workers from Semenggoh who had joined the team, gets lost himself and has to spend the night in the forest.

Despite their efforts, they cannot track the orang-utans until one day, a few weeks later, they find Banggan lying at the base of a tree. She is dead; terribly thin with no evidence of injuries or attacks. Banggan believes she died of starvation and he realises that the other two cannot survive in the forest either. They redouble their efforts but still cannot find Bullet and Seduku.

About a month after the orang-utans have been released, some local farmers call the Forest Department saying that two orang-utans are wandering in their pepper gardens. Banggan goes to the pepper gardens and leaves fruit to tempt the orang-utans. When the fruit is taken, he knows they are nearby and hungry, and they will come again. So, he leaves fruit for them again and, one day, he is there when the orang-utans appear. When he emerges to lead them into the cages, they come with him quite willingly. They are thin and weak. They do not resist.

The two surviving orang-utan orphans are returned to Semenggoh Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre. The rehabilitation attempt and release have failed. Later, Banggan is summoned to explain what happened, why the female orang-utan died. He must tell the truth and he explains, describing his orders in the simple message on the cigarette paper.

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Today, it is understood that the best way to rehabilitate confiscated orang-utans is to keep them as far apart from humans and their activities as possible. Though infant orang-utans need nurturing and loving contact, human intervention must be as minimal as possible to prevent the orang-utans from habituating themselves on human behavior, or bonding with their keepers. Their survival in the wild depends on this. Kept apart from their keepers to stay free of diseases and human behaviours, these orphans have a

better chance of fending for themselves in wild places, where there are no competing orang-utan populations, and where there is an abundance of fruits and other plants they would naturally consume.

We humans, the only apes not facing extinction, are trying to save our cousins, but our efforts are not always appropriate. The reintroduction of confiscated orang-utans to the wild can only take place after the young animals have been released on a trial basis in pockets of forest where they can be monitored and retrieved if necessary. Once the orphans can find their own food, and build their own nests, they might be deemed rehabilitated, able to be reintroduced to the wild for good. What Banggan described happening in Sebuyau in the 1970s was what scientists call a hard release: an unwitting cruelty. And though not a scientist, Banggan did try to ease the orang-utans' reintroduction to the wild. It was not enough for any of them, least of all for his namesake, the young orang-utan with the beautiful shiny, bushy hair. The Wildlife Officer said he had been sabotaged; the two stories are contradictory, but it is clear that it was the young orang-utans who had been sabotaged.

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Creative nonfiction allows me to write the stories of ordinary people who are frequently overlooked, even ignored. As I shape and craft the stories, I am discovering and learning the meaning of the stories that have been shared with me through in-depth interviews. Expanding on snippets of information, or sifting through long monologues that diverge and are brought back through careful questions and probes, the stories are pieced together to make a coherent tale.

I met both research participants separately at different times and locations; and while the forest guard's story never changed, the Wildlife Officer's did. Which story, then, tells the true tale of what happened? Janet Burroway (2009: 293) tells us in her well-known essay 'The true disclaimer' that 'there's a clear and simple touchstone of nonfiction truth: absence of the intent to deceive.' Thus, the answer to my dilemma is simple. I had to leave it to the reader to decide. So, I told each participant's story, and braided the stories into the Sarawak they recalled in the late 1970s. Their stories intertwined with the stories of the orang-utans.

And finally, from my own perspective, I imagined what the young orang-utan, Banggan, might have experienced. Never anthropomorphize, my husband tells me, and biologists tell us in their learned books. But this is my contribution to the story. It is my imagination that pictures the young orang-utan whose life is such a poignant tale of loss and grief; evidence of the cruelty of humans and the misguided attempt to re-introduce her to the forest where she once belonged, but which now was no longer welcoming, indeed, no longer her home.

I imagined that perhaps it may have felt to the humans that it was the right thing to do; that Banggan was ready to return to the forest, that a better life awaited her where other orang-utans roamed free. And I imagined what the orang-utan herself might have felt: perhaps that it was an exciting adventure that turned into a nightmare eventually spiralling into a painful death from starvation. Dinty Moore advises, 'Instead of telling us about your reactions, show us what you saw or heard. Let the reader have the

reaction' (Moore 2007: 81). So, I wrote what I knew from the stories the forest guard and the Wildlife Officer told me. And by reading the braided stories, readers may react and attempt to interpret the truth.

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The forest guard takes a sip of Jasmine Green tea. His eyes are looking somewhere else, his mind far away in the past as I scribble in my notepad, the voice recorder on my phone still on.

Banggan was beautiful; she had shiny, bushy hair.

It is impossible to know what an orang-utan thinks or feels. Yet, I cannot help but put myself in her place, an orphan adrift in a strange world where nothing seems completely right. This orang-utan orphan is a stranger in a strange land, whether in the arms of a human, confined in a metal cage or released in a forest. Can an orphaned orang-utan recall the different places she's lived? Can she even recognise a place as natural when she's been translocated so often and to and from such different places among such different creatures?

In my mind, I see a young orang-utan, snatched from her mother, taken from her home in the forest, caged in the *langkau*, fed rotten vegetables and fruit, maybe even stale bread and leftover rice. Then she's taken to a new place far away. She doesn't know she's been rescued, but in this new place, she can see many trees, and she can see other animals trapped in wired or metal enclosures of different sizes. First, she is also kept in a cage. Then, she is let out and is encouraged to climb up trees and ropes. There are other orang-utans in this forested area, but she doesn't know how to behave with them. How do you speak to strangers even if they look as you do when you haven't spoken the language in a long time? She learns how to climb trees and hold onto vines, ropes and branches. She enjoys the figs in the forest and learns to forage. But still, she comes back to the fresh bananas and papayas that are laid out on wooden boards and planks twice a day. Many humans come to see her and the other orang-utans feeding. Some are little like she is. But she is growing bigger and stronger.

I try to imagine the day she is given something that makes her sleep for a long while. When she wakes, she is being carried in a little cage along a trail. She's still groggy so she sleeps some more. In the morning, she wakes up properly and is more alert now. A man – perhaps he is familiar to her – gives her some fruit. The bananas, papayas and sweet potatoes are tasty. Then he opens the cage. The door is wide open. There are trees and ferns, little shoots and leaves on the ground. She sees the wires of the cage on her sides and behind her. She smells the man nearby, holding the door open. In front are the trees. She leans forward on her knuckles and shuffles out slowly. She feels the forest floor beneath her. Then she reaches up and touches the nearest tree. She grasps the tree. She has done this before, but in a different place. Maybe she is confused, excited, anxious. Maybe she asks herself, should I go back in the metal enclosure? Or should I climb up? Is there food up there? Is it safe? Perhaps she hesitates. Then she disappears up the tree.

Research statement

Research background

Narrative inquiry is ‘a storytelling methodology through which we study narratives and stories of experience’ (Kim 2016: 118). It is the ideal method to research and gather stories from individuals whose lived experiences have taken them to the natural and built habitats of the only ape that can be found outside Africa. The two individuals interviewed for this creative nonfiction work had years of lived experience working directly and indirectly with captive and wild orang-utans. They had many stories they wished to share and were happy, even anxious, to tell me these stories. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000: xxvi) say of narrative inquiry, ‘People live stories and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others …’ Through narrative inquiry, I research, observe and interview, learn and re-tell the stories as creative nonfiction to share the lived experiences of people who are seldom noticed or heard.

Research contribution

The attempted rehabilitation and release of the three orang-utans took place in the late 1970s and it is one of two known attempts in Sarawak, both of which failed. Details about this particular incident have not been published and this is the first time the two stories of the key individuals involved in the incident have been brought together in a creative nonfiction story. Their two perspectives on the incident lead us to ask, ‘what is truth?’, a question that is often asked of creative nonfiction. Here, we ask as well, ‘whose story tells us the truth?’

Research significance

In this creative nonfiction work, each research participant’s story is told, braided, with the other’s tale as well as intertwined with the stories of the three orang-utans. On truth, Janet Burroway (2009: 293) tells us, ‘there’s a clear and simple touchstone of nonfiction truth: absence of the intent to deceive.’ In addition, Dinty Moore (2007: 81) advises, ‘Instead of telling us about your reactions, show us what you saw or heard. Let the reader have the reaction.’ Thus, the stories of the forest guard and Wildlife Officer are re-told without judgment or bias, and from the reading of the braided stories, the reader reacts, and interprets the truth she has witnessed in the re-telling of the stories. Creative nonfiction allows this, crafting what sociologist Jeong-Hee Kim (2016: 286) calls ‘a virtual reality where stories seem real to the reader.’ Significantly, the stories are true to the lives shared with the researcher, and yet it is the reader who decides whose story tells the truth and what actually transpired more than forty years ago in Ulu Sebuyau, Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo.

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