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THE FORGOTTEN WATERS: A CRITIQUE OF MALAYSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

(AIR YANG DILUPAKAN: KRITIKAN TERHADAP HISTORIOGRAFI MALAYSIA)

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Abstract

In Malaysian historiography, I observe that the theme of water has long been marginalised, in stark contrast to the global development of water historiography where water is increasingly recognised as a social agent, a site of memory, and a field of power. In this article, I argue that such marginalisation is not merely a failure of thematic selection but reflects a deeper epistemological colonisation that began during the colonial period and continues to permeate postcolonial state structures. By critically rereading the archives, water rituals, and ecological transformations as alternative archives, I expose how water has been objectified, silenced, and instrumentalised within colonial and developmentalist projects of power. I do not merely critique the descriptive tendencies within the historical writing of water; instead, I propose a fluid hydrosocial historiography that combines pluriversal epistemologies, reading against the grain of the archive, and a deep appreciation for collective subjectivity and memory. I reposition water not simply as an economic resource but as a site of trauma, resistance, and political imagination. Drawing connections between theories of decolonisation, political ecology, and memory studies, I construct a more reflective methodological framework to write water histories through lived experiences, emotions, and multilayered human-environment relations. Through critical analysis of Malaysian cases, I demonstrate that rewriting the history of water is not merely an expansion of historiographical themes but a profound challenge to the epistemic structures that govern how we know, remember, and imagine our relationship with water. Through this approach, I restore water not merely as a technical object but as an epistemic space where histories of loss intertwine with the possibilities of a more just and sustainable future.

Keywords: Water Historiography, Epistemological Decolonisation, Hydrosocial Relations, Alternative Archives, Malaysian Postcolonial Critique

Abstrak

Dalam pensejarahan Malaysia, saya perhatikan bahawa tema air telah lama dipinggirkan, berbeza sekali dengan perkembangan global pensejarahan air di mana air semakin diiktiraf sebagai agen sosial, tapak ingatan dan medan kuasa. Dalam makalah ini, saya berpendapat bahawa peminggiran sebegitu bukan semata-mata kegagalan pemilihan tematik tetapi mencerminkan penjajahan epistemologi yang lebih mendalam yang bermula pada zaman penjajahan dan terus meresap dalam struktur negara pascakolonial. Dengan membaca semula secara kritis arkib, ritual air dan transformasi ekologi sebagai arkib alternatif, saya

mendedahkan bagaimana air telah diobjektifkan, disenyapkan dan diperalatkan dalam projek kuasa kolonial dan pembangunan. Saya tidak hanya mengkritik kecenderungan deskriptif dalam penulisan sejarah air; sebaliknya, saya mencadangkan pensejarahan hidrososial cair yang menggabungkan epistemologi pluriversal, membaca bertentangan dengan butiran arkib dan penghargaan yang mendalam untuk subjektiviti dan ingatan kolektif. Saya meletakkan semula air bukan sahaja sebagai sumber ekonomi tetapi sebagai tapak trauma, penentangan dan imaginasi politik. Melukis hubungan antara teori dekolonisasi, ekologi politik dan kajian ingatan, saya membina rangka kerja metodologi yang lebih mencerminkan untuk menulis sejarah air melalui pengalaman hidup, emosi, dan hubungan manusia-persekitaran berbilang lapisan. Melalui analisis kritikal kes-kes Malaysia, saya menunjukkan bahawa menulis semula sejarah air bukan sekadar pengembangan tema sejarah tetapi cabaran yang mendalam terhadap struktur epistemik yang mengawal cara kita mengetahui, mengingat dan membayangkan hubungan kita dengan air. Melalui pendekatan ini, saya memulihkan air bukan sahaja sebagai objek teknikal tetapi sebagai ruang epistemik di mana sejarah kehilangan berkait dengan kemungkinan masa depan yang lebih adil dan mampan.

Kata Kunci: *Pensejarahan Air, Dekolonisasi Epistemologi, Hubungan Hidrososial, Arkib Alternatif, Kritikan Pasca Kolonial Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

In the history of Malaysia, water has always been present but rarely written. It flows through rivers that once sustained ancient kingdoms, delineated state boundaries, nourished paddy fields and gave rise to cities yet in the dominant historiographical corpus, it remains marginal. I begin this article with a serious question: why, in a country so deeply dependent on water whether as an economic resource, spiritual symbol, or instrument of power has water not been granted legitimacy as a historical subject? I argue that the marginalisation of water in Malaysian historical writing stems from an inherited colonial epistemology that continues to shape postcolonial narratives. This absence is not incidental; it reflects how postcolonial states reproduce modes of knowledge production defined by colonial governance (Kheng 2007).

In contrast, global historiography has seen the dramatic rise of water studies since the 1980s, especially through the emergence of environmental history, political ecology, and technopolitics. Donald Worster, Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West (1992) exposed how irrigation in the American West was not merely an economic project but an internal form of colonisation fusing nature, power, and capital. Richard White (2011) introduced the notion of "the organic machine" to frame the dialectical relationship between the Columbia River and human labour. In India, Sunil Amrith (2018) has demonstrated how British colonialism manipulated water as a tool of governance and population control. In China, histories of dam construction and water management have been read as manifestations of the modern authoritarian state (Magee 2006). Yet in Malaysia, water remains archived as administrative data, charted on engineering blueprints, or mentioned briefly in the margins of agricultural history. It has never truly been positioned as an epistemological field in its own right.

This is because Malaysian historiography remains deeply embedded in developmentalist and nationalist narratives grounded in colonial models (Weiss 2005). Within this framework, water cannot speak; it is rendered a numerical object likes reservoir percentages, dam capacities, pollution indices. In contrast, I argue that water is a living entity infused with meaning: it is a symbol of royal legitimacy, a site of contestation between state and locality, and the spiritual life blood of many traditional communities (Abdullah et al. 2024: Linton 2010). Yet these meanings have been silenced by forms of historical writing rooted in colonial archival logic one that privileges legibility, measurability, and governability.

To unpack this problem, I employ three interlinked theoretical frameworks. The first is Hydrosocial Territories (Boelens et al. 2016), a concept that rejects the notion of water as neutral and

instead frames it as a contested socio-political space, produced through interactions of identity, authority, and memory. The second is Colonial Technopolitics (Mitchell 2002; Larkin 2013), which provides a framework to interrogate how colonial infrastructure projects, such as irrigation systems and dams, were not only economic interventions but also mechanisms for spatial control, the production of compliant colonial subjects, and the perpetuation of geopolitical inequality. The third is Decolonial Epistemology (Mignolo 2009; Santos 2015), which questions how colonial forms of knowledge technocratic, bureaucratic, Cartesianhave erased vernacular ways of understanding water as heritage, symbol, and power.

My methodology is interdisciplinary and deconstructive. I conduct research at national and colonial archives, consulting British administrative records and Malaysia water supply files to uncover the infrastructural, legal, and political dimensions of colonial water governance. I also engage with classical Malaysian manuscripts such as *Sejarah Melayu* and *Misa Melayu*, which offer insight into indigenous cosmologies and the political symbolism of water. In addition, I visit libraries to review secondary sources related to the history, politics, and cultural meanings of water in Malaysia.

The existing Malaysian historiography is strikingly silent on water as a central theme. Foundational texts by Roff (1967) and Gullick (1981) prioritise political and administrative history, while water appears only as a geographic backdrop. Even in studies of Malay peasantry, such as Lim Teck Ghee's work (1977), irrigation is addressed as a facility rather than a site of power. In contrast, histories of India, Egypt, or Iran have long positioned water as a key site of ideological contestation and resistance. For instance, David Gilmartin's work on irrigation and colonial power in British India illustrates how water governance became central to the making of the modern state and its legitimacy (Gilmartin 1994). In the Egyptian context, Timothy Mitchell critically examines how the Nile's management was intertwined with technopolitical control and colonial interests (Mitchell 2002). Similarly, in Iran, Neda Zawahri explores how transboundary water management and hydraulic politics have been deeply connected to state-building, regional power struggles, and governance (Zawahri 2008). The omission in Malaysia suggests that water has not merely disappeared from the archive, but from the historical imagination itself.

I contend that this erasure is symptomatic of a broader epistemic capture. As Guha & Gayatri Spivak (1988) has argued, epistemic violence occurs when forms of knowing that fall outside colonial-modern paradigms are silenced or delegitimised. In Malaysia's case, technocratic epistemology has overwritten water's cultural and political histories with graphs, flowcharts, and statistical dashboards. Rivers are no longer read as the arteries of community but as infrastructure; water is no longer sacred, but quantified (Ujang 2022). This article challenges that epistemological enclosure. I do not simply aim to introduce a new theme; rather, I seek to diagnose why water has remained unwritten, and how that absence reflects structural deficiencies in Malaysian historiography. I argue that reclaiming water as a historical subject is not merely an academic intervention, it is an act of resistance against colonial legacies of silencing and control. Water must be repositioned as both narrative and force: a vector of memory, a register of dissent, and a pulse of power. To approach water as a site of encounter between geography and governance, cosmology and control, is to rewrite Southeast Asian history from a submerged perspective. Water history is not just about dams or policies; it is about displacements, silences, and forgotten sovereignties. This article begins that critical re-reading and calls for a decolonised historiography that recognises water as a living archive of Asia's colonial and postcolonial transformations.

UNVEILING COLONIAL EPISTEMOLOGY IN MALAYSIA'S WATER HISTORIOGRAPHY

To understand the marginalisation of water as a legitimate historical subject in Malaysia, it is first necessary to excavate the colonial epistemological structures that have shaped, and continue to shape, the production of history (Wolfe 2006). Water was not omitted from the national historical narrative by accident; rather, it was deliberately decontextualised and rendered invisible through an epistemic violence enacted during colonial rule. British colonialism in Malaya systematically redefined water, not as a cultural, spiritual, or political agent, but as an economic resource and a mechanism for spatial

control. Through the proliferation of administrative records such as the Drainage and Irrigation Department reports, colonial ordinances on water management, and hydrographic mapping, water was institutionalised in the form of quantifiable data: river flows, dam capacities, and irrigated acreage (Abdullah et al. 2023). There was little to no recognition of indigenous knowledge systems that understood water as an animate entity embedded within cosmological, ritualistic, and socio-political frameworks. This transformation of water from a "living element" into a "dead resource" reflected what Timothy Mitchell terms colonial technopolitics, the project of reordering not only landscapes but also the consciousness of colonised populations, embedding the belief that nature was a technical problem to be managed, rather than a space of memory, identity, and struggle (Mitchell 2002).

The tragedy deepened after independence. Instead of dismantling the colonial epistemological frameworks governing water, the postcolonial Malaysian state inherited and perpetuated them, largely through developmentalist paradigms. Institutions such as the National Water Services Commission (SPAN) continue to approach water primarily through technocratic rationalities, framing it as a commodity to be allocated and regulated rather than a socio-political actor. Historical writing followed a similar path (Ujang 2022). Water appears in Malaysian historiography primarily as an adjunct to narratives of economic development: the expansion of paddy cultivation, the building of hydroelectric dams, and the modernisation of urban water supply systems (Abdullah & Mohd Noor 2019: Ahmat 1970). Rarely, if ever, is water treated as a site of cultural struggle, political symbolism, or historical agency.

This stands in stark contrast to historiographical developments elsewhere. In India, historians like David Gilmartin (1994) have shown how colonial irrigation schemes in Punjab not only restructured agrarian economies but also created new legal regimes and contested notions of sovereignty over natural resources. In Egypt, Timothy Mitchell's (2012) analysis of the Aswan High Dam reveals how dam-building served as both an infrastructural and ideological project reshaping the Nile not merely as a river but as the foundation of a technocratic state apparatus. In the United States, environmental historians have long re-centred rivers such as the Colorado and the Mississippi as active agents in shaping the social, economic, and political life of the regions they traverse (Wyckoff 1999). The intellectual reorientation evident in these contexts has led to a profound shift: water is no longer an invisible background; it is recognised as a central analytic in understanding empire, resistance, and modernity.

Malaysia, however, remains caught in a different trajectory. The marginality of water in Malaysian historical writing is symptomatic of a deeper epistemological capture. Following Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2009) critique of "historicism", Malaysian historiography continues to privilege those narratives that conform to Western-derived logics of progress, quantification, and developmentalism. This has produced a historical field where water exists primarily as infrastructure, not as history; where rivers are described in terms of irrigation efficiency and dam yield, rather than as spaces of political negotiation, social reproduction, and cultural meaning. The result is not merely an omission; it is an epistemological impoverishment—a foreclosure of alternative ways of knowing, living with, and remembering water.

Yet if we turn to indigenous textual traditions, a different history of water emerges. Early Malay manuscripts such as the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Misa Melayu* reveal intricate connections between sovereignty, cosmology, and water. Kings derived their legitimacy not only through lineage but also through their capacity to control and sanctify water bodies. Access to, and dominion over, rivers and coastal areas symbolised the health of the polity and the righteousness of rule (Winstedt 1919; Winstedt 1938). Water was not simply a utilitarian necessity; it was a medium through which divine authority was manifest, and through which political claims were naturalised. However, these epistemologies were displaced as colonial modernity restructured political thought, reordering water as a technical and economic problem while disavowing its symbolic and cultural dimensions.

The sidelining of these alternative understandings continued into the postcolonial period. Nationalist historiography, focused on political struggle, economic growth, and ethnic accommodation, rarely interrogated the environmental histories underpinning Malaysia's social

transformations (Faaland 2005). Even as environmental degradation and water scarcity became pressing national concerns, historical scholarship largely failed to reposition water as a central subject. Instead, water appeared in policy discussions, engineering treatises, and agricultural reports—never fully in the domain of critical historiographical reflection. Consequently, the possibility of thinking about water as a contested social field, or as a historical agent capable of shaping social relations and state formation, has been largely foreclosed.

I argue that to reposition water within Malaysian historiography requires not merely an addition of new empirical data but a fundamental rethinking of methodological approaches. It demands a critical rereading of existing colonial archives, not for the purpose of extracting more data points, but to interrogate the assumptions underpinning their production. It requires asking different questions: How was water mobilised as a technology of colonial governance? How did local communities negotiate, subvert, or resist colonial hydrological interventions? How did rituals of kingship, cosmological beliefs, and everyday practices embed water within social and political orders? How did dam construction and river diversion in the postcolonial era reproduce colonial spatial logics under the guise of development? To address these questions, I propose adopting the hydrosocial territories framework, which conceptualises water as a socially produced space of conflict, negotiation, and meaning making. Rather than viewing rivers and aquifers as natural resources awaiting rational management, they should be understood as terrains where social relations are inscribed, contested, and transformed. Reading water histories through this lens enables a more critical engagement with the ways in which power, knowledge, and environment intersect in Malaysia's colonial and postcolonial trajectories.

Ultimately, the call to write the history of water in Malaysia is not merely an academic exercise. It is an epistemological intervention aimed at dismantling the residual colonial logics that continue to govern what counts as legitimate history. It is a call to rethink the archive, to decolonise the categories of historical thought, and to recover submerged narratives of struggle, memory, and belonging that flow through the waterways of the nation. To write water into history is to reclaim a richer, more fluid, and more critical understanding of Malaysia's past, one that recognises that water, far from being neutral, has always been a site of power, resistance, and possibility.

SILENCED CURRENTS: THE ERASURE OF WATER ARCHIVES IN MALAYSIA'S COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES

In examining how water has been marginalised within Malaysian historiography, I contend that it is not only colonial epistemology that shaped how water was understood but also the deliberate erasure of water from both material and narrative archives that played a central role in silencing its historical agency. Rivers, dams, drainage systems, and irrigation networks, once the backbone of early societies in Malaysia, were mapped, measured, and absorbed into the colonial logic of administration, but simultaneously stripped of their original social, cultural, and political meanings. Within colonial archives, water was reduced to mere numerical data: hectares irrigated, annual rainfall statistics, reservoir capacities. What disappeared was not merely the voices of the communities dependent on these waters, but water's own narrative as a historical agent (Abdullah 2021: Andaya 2018: Nasir 2005).

I argue that colonialism did not merely conquer land; it conquered water and, more crucially, the meanings attached to water (Abdullah et al. 2023, Tvedt 2011). This colonisation of water was executed through two primary epistemic strategies: first, the material transformation of water landscapes through colonial engineering; second, the construction of an archival apparatus that framed water as a technical rather than a social entity (Broich 2007). By building canals, dams, and drainage systems to serve colonial economic interests especially the plantation economy of rubber and sugar, water was severed from its communal functions (Mangmeechai 2020: Chiarelli et al. 2020). Rivers that once served as arteries of transportation, sites of ritual, and symbolic boundaries of communities were reimagined as "infrastructure", judged by standards of efficiency, productivity, and return on investment (Nasir 2005).

More insidious, however, was the construction of an archive that reinforced this logic. The British record of water supply were compiled not to capture the social histories of water but to satisfy the bureaucratic demands of the colonial administration: how much crop yield had increased following irrigation projects? What were the figures for flood reduction after river engineering works? There were no questions about how these interventions disrupted village social structures, altered human-water relations, or erased local ecological knowledge systems. In other words, the colonial archive did not merely record reality; it produced a new reality, one where water was silenced as a living subject and transformed into a manageable administrative object (CO 716/2).

This erasure did not cease with the end of colonial rule. In postcolonial Malaysia, the state—while aspiring towards modernisation, continued this technocratic legacy without fundamental critique. Mega projects such as the Temenggor Dam, the Kenyir Dam, and the Muda Irrigation Scheme were executed within the frameworks of technical discourse and economic nationalism (Karim & Mansor 2013: Abd Wahab et al. 2022: PKR (N2TM) W 37/121 Vol 8 (413)). Water was still perceived primarily as a "resource" for national development, rather than as a social or symbolic field of contestation. In official state archives, documents pertaining to water projects showcase statistics of productivity, expanded paddy acreage, and export growth, but nowhere do they raise the questions: Who lost their land? Who lost their traditional water access? How did these communities adapt or resist these transformations in ways that remain unrecorded in the official narratives? (P. S. U (KEDAH) 383-1376).

Even more concerning is that postcolonial archives often erase narratives of community displacement and resistance under the guise of "national development" (Abdullah & Mohd Noor 2020). Here, I see a continuation of the colonial structure in the form of developmentalist nationalism, a formation wherein the postcolonial state adopts colonial language to advance its own projects, while retaining the colonial logic of silencing alternative spaces of historical meaning (S. E. 1091/1355). As Stoler (2008) argues through her notion of "colonial archives as epistemic technologies," the archive is not a neutral repository but an active site of knowledge production, selectively organising what is visible and what is erased to serve dominant regimes of power. In the Malaysian context, the archive surrounding water projects has become one of the most potent instruments for constructing a national memory that denies the social history of water.

However, I argue that water retains the capacity to "speak back" through critical rereadings of the archive. If one examines old colonial maps, one notices that rivers now labelled as "drainage lines" once served as crucial arteries of trade, communication, and cultural exchange. If one rereads British water report reports closely, one can detect subtle anxieties about communities that resisted the imposition of colonial hydrological schemes, evident in the "failures" to maintain newly constructed drains or the "misuse" of water outside engineered norms. In other words, the archive itself, when read against its grain, reveals small cracks through which the submerged histories of water and water-dependent communities can still be glimpsed, albeit in fractured and partial form (Report By Mr. J. S. Boissier B. Sc. M.I.W.E, AG. S. E. E).

I propose that we must construct what I call an "alternative water archive" for Malaysia: not merely by collecting more official documents but by curating oral histories, community memory maps, ritual documentation, and micro-histories that reanimate the human-water relationships effaced by colonial and postcolonial projects. This requires us to step outside the colonial-national archival logic and to build an epistemology that acknowledges water as not just a resource to be administered but as a living, remembered, and contested entity. Within this framework, the concept of hydrosocial memory becomes crucial. It emphasises that water shapes not only material histories but emotional, social, and cultural histories as well. A dried river, a displaced spring, a flooded village, these are not merely environmental losses; they are erasures of ways of life, value systems, and collective identities intimately tied to water. Communities displaced by dam construction or river diversion do not just lose access to water; they lose the memory of being in a reciprocal relationship with it.

Thus, I argue that writing the history of water in Malaysia cannot rely solely on official archives. We must make room for alternative forms of history, fluid histories, fragmented and unofficial, but perhaps more honest in capturing the depths of human experience with water. Rewriting Malaysia's water history means not merely recounting narratives of dam construction and irrigation expansion, but bringing forth the stories of loss, mourning, adaptation, and resistance that have long been submerged under the surface of developmentalist triumphalism. In this sense, water long silenced in colonial and postcolonial archivesmust be restored as a living, vibrating, and rebellious historical field. It is our task as historians to reopen these riverine memories and to allow water to speak with a voice of history that is more just, more reflective, and more liberating.

FROM INFRASTRUCTURE TO INSURGENCY: REIMAGINING WATER AS A POLITICAL AGENT IN POSTCOLONIAL MALAYSIA

In the previous discussions, I argued how water has been archived as a technical object under colonialism and how the postcolonial Malaysian state inherited that logic without deep critique. However, in this subtopic, I intend to push the argument further: I seek to challenge us to reimagine water not merely as infrastructure, but as an active political agent that has continually shaped the social history of Malaysia (Abdullah & Zakarya 2022: Abdullah et al. 2022). I contend that beneath water's apparent silence in official archives, it has always been a site of insurgency that has never been fully controlled by the state. Rivers that were directed, dams that were built, and water networks that were planned did not simply serve as instruments of control; they continuously opened spaces for resistance, adaptation, and alternative imaginations of power (Abdullah & Mohd Noor 2018: Abd Rani & Md Khalid 2025).

Water as infrastructure is a project of the state: it must be controlled, engineered, and made to serve the logic of development (Abdullah 2021). In Malaysian state rhetoric, especially since the era of the New Economic Policy, water has been framed as the backbone of agricultural, industrial, and urban development (Abdullah & Mohd Noor 2020). Mega projects such as the Muda Irrigation Scheme, the Bakun Dam, and interstate water transfers like the Muda River supply to Penang demonstrate how water has been placed at the core of the national development narrative (Abdullah & Mohd Noor 2018: Keong 2005: PKR (N2TM) W 37/121 Vol 8 (432)). However, this narrative imagines water as a passive entity, obedient to the state's desires. I argue that this is a profound illusion. In truth, water constantly flows beyond the borders imposed upon it, transcending the technocratic uses that the state seeks to institutionalise (Abdullah 2024).

If we critically read the history of major water projects in Malaysia, we will observe that none have ever achieved complete stability or success according to the state's developmental logic. Dams have flooded Orang Asli villages; irrigation schemes have triggered tensions between upstream and downstream communities; water transfer projects have sparked conflicts over riparian rights and the balance of power between state and federal authorities. In all these cases, water does not merely function as a medium of development but becomes a site of insurgency, a space where local communities, marginalised groups, and non-state actors reclaim their rights to the meaning and use of water (Swainson & McGregor 2008: Karim & Mansor 2013).

I propose viewing water as a form of "infrastructural insurgency" that demands a fundamental rethinking of the concept of infrastructure itself. Conventionally, infrastructure is theorised as an embodiment of state power: facilitating governance, reinforcing hegemony, and modernising societies. Yet, as Larkin (2013) suggests, infrastructure is equally a site of failure, friction, and subversion. In Malaysia, the persistent breakdown of rural water supply systems, the structural vulnerabilities of small dams, and the political contests over interstate water access reveal that water cannot be fully controlled or domesticated (Abdullah & Zakarya 2022: Jamri 2022). In this light, water is not simply politicised; water itself is political, it acts as a medium that contests central authority and demands attention to structural injustices.

Furthermore, within local communities, water continues to be understood not through the state's utilitarian logic but through relational and cultural worldviews. In many rural areas across Malaysia, rivers remain sites of collective memory, ritual spaces, and social arteries that resist full commodification. Among Orang Asli communities, for example, water forms part of a cosmological network that shapes their understanding of the world; it is not merely a resource for irrigation or hydroelectric power. This suggests that even as the state seeks to inscribe water within a modern economic framework, alternative epistemologies of water persist operating insurgently at the margins of official discourse, yet refusing to disappear (Swainson & McGregor 2008: Karim & Mansor 2013).

Within this framework, I propose a new reading of Malaysia's water projects: not merely as instances of infrastructure development but as arenas of struggle over the ownership of narratives and meanings attached to water. Who gets to define what water is? Is it merely a commodity to be allocated and priced, or is it a space of social relation and cultural memory that must be defended? The conflict over the Muda River between Kedah and Penang, for instance, reveals that water is far more than a technical issue; it is a matter of sovereignty, distributive justice, and the clash between state-driven narratives and local community claims (Abdullah et al. 2024). Likewise, in the case of the Bakun Dam, we witness how water becomes the terrain upon which Dayak communities reassert their rights to land, culture, and self-determination (Weinlein 2017).

I further argue that seeing water as a political agent transforms our understanding of "development" itself. Development, long framed as a neutral project of collective upliftment, must be recognised as a selective, hierarchical, and exclusionary process. Water exposes how development creates winners and losers, who gains access to resources and who is marginalised; who is integrated into the modern economy and who is left to struggle at the edges (Abdullah & Mohd Noor 2019). By reading water as a site of insurgency, I open a critical space to rethink the celebratory rhetoric of national development and to uncover the hidden social fractures embedded within it.

Finally, I contend that recognising water as a political agent demands a bolder historiography, one that no longer treats water merely as the backdrop for state projects but acknowledges it as an active actor that shapes, contests, and transforms Malaysia's historical trajectory. It demands that we reread dams, drainage systems, and pipelines not only as symbols of progress but as sites of contestation over land, identity, and justice. In reading water as a political agent, we do not merely revise the history of water; we fundamentally revise how we understand Malaysia's national history itself.

In this sense, water is not simply trapped within rivers or contained by dams; it flows within memory, within struggle, and within alternative imaginings of the future. It continues to move, to resist, and to rebel against the boundaries imposed upon it. Thus, the history of water in Malaysia must be seen not only as a history of control but also as a history of insurgency, a history where water, in all its silences and disruptions, remains an indomitable agent of change.

DECOLONISING THE HYDROSOCIAL IMAGINATION: LIBERATING WATER NARRATIVES IN MALAYSIAN HISTORY

In the preceding sections, I explored how water was transformed into a technical object under colonialism, how it was marginalised within postcolonial national archives, and how it has continued to function as a political agent within Malaysia's social history. In this subtopic, I seek to elevate the discussion to a more radical plane: I argue that reconstructing the history of water in Malaysia requires more than a critique of infrastructure or policy. It demands a complete decolonisation of our hydrosocial imagination. Without freeing our understanding of what water is, how it should be comprehended, and how it operates within social worlds, we cannot build a water historiography that is just, reflective, and genuinely postcolonial (Ping & Fernando 2018: Ujang et al. 2022).

The inherited colonial hydrosocial imagination defines water purely in functional terms: it is a resource for productivity, an instrument for administration, and an object for management (Abdullah & Mohd Noor 2017). This view is not only entrenched within Malaysia's modern administrative

systems but has also seeped into the way society at large has been taught to perceive human-water relations. Educational manuals, mass media, and official documentation all reinforce this logic: water exists to be drunk, irrigated, and harnessed for electricity; "useful" water is water that is controlled, channelled, and exploited (Garde-Hansen 2021). Within this imagination, uncontrolled water is framed as waste, and free-flowing rivers are seen as potential risks. I argue that this is the most insidious legacy of colonialism, not through legislation or physical domination, but through the shaping of a mentality that presumes human-water relations must be governed by technocratic rationality.

If we are to decolonise this imagination, we must begin by recognising that water carries meanings far beyond its instrumental uses. Within Malay traditions, rivers were never merely economic routes; they were symbolic spaces connecting the human world to the spiritual realm, sites of birth and life cycles, arenas of political legitimacy, and meeting grounds for diverse cultures (Nasir 2025). Rituals such as *mandi safar*, the recognition of water sources as ancestral heritage, and the centrality of rivers in folklore demonstrate that water was regarded as a meaningful entity, not simply a physical substance (Gunaish et al. 2024). Yet, all these meanings have been systematically excised from official discourse, relegated to the domains of the "traditional," the "unscientific," or the "backward." I contend that this constitutes epistemicide the killing of entire knowledge systems that do not conform to colonial rationalities.

Decolonising the hydrosocial imagination requires reopening the narrative possibilities surrounding water that have long been foreclosed. We must re-read rivers not as "drainage systems" but as "social spaces"; we must see dams not only as "economic assets" but as contested sites of memory and power (Linton & Budds 2014: Boelens et al. 2016). We must acknowledge that every shift in water flow brings about not only ecological consequences but also social and emotional transformations within communities. This demands an interdisciplinary approach integrating social history, anthropology, political ecology, and even literary studies to dismantle the disciplinary silos that have long constrained holistic readings of water.

In the Malaysian context, decolonising the hydrosocial imagination also means challenging the myths of development that position water as an unquestionable prerequisite for progress without accounting for its social and cultural costs (Abdullah 2024: Williams 2020). The construction of major dams, for instance, is frequently celebrated as evidence of national engineering prowess. Yet how many community histories were submerged with the building of dams such as Bakun? (Keong 2005). How many heritage sites, traditional agricultural systems, and cosmological relationships with water were destroyed in the name of "progress"? I argue that these losses are not merely material damages; they represent epistemological losses—the erasure of alternative futures and knowledges (Hosseiny et al. 2022: Bakker 2012).

I propose that one path towards liberating the hydrosocial imagination is to reintroduce narratives that position water as an emotional, spiritual, and cultural agent. This does not mean rejecting science or technology, but rather situating them in a more balanced relationship with other value systems that recognise the sacredness and agency of water. Malaysian water history should be written not only from the perspective of litres distributed or hectares irrigated, but also by tracing how water shapes senses of community, how the disappearance of rivers erodes social fabrics, and how struggles to protect free-flowing waters are also struggles to defend meanings of life itself.

Within this framework, I suggest three major interventions: first, the creation of an "alternative water archive" that collects oral histories, poetry, folk songs, and rituals associated with water from diverse communities; second, a critical rereading of colonial and postcolonial archives to interrogate what has been silenced and what has been foregrounded regarding water; third, the development of hydrosocial theories rooted in Southeast Asian experiences, rather than merely importing Western frameworks uncritically.

I believe that only by liberating the hydrosocial imagination can we cultivate a genuinely postcolonial water historiography, one that no longer presents water merely as a "tool for development," but as a historical subject, a site of contestation, and a source of life embedded within the experiences and imaginations of local societies. This also means accepting that water histories will never be entirely orderly, numerical, or systematic. They will be fragmented, emotional, and sometimes contradictory because such is the nature of water: flowing, overflowing, meandering according to the emotional and historical landscapes of human lives.

Thus, the task of writing water history is not merely to document changes in irrigation systems or the construction of dams. It is the task of liberating water narratives from the prisons of colonial epistemology, allowing water once again to speak in its fluid, layered, and meaningful language. Only then can water reclaim its rightful place, not just in concrete channels, but within history, within imagination, and within the struggle for a more just and sustainable future.

TOWARDS A HYDROSOCIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: FORGING NEW METHODOLOGIES FOR WRITING MALAYSIA'S WATER HISTORY

Having discussed how water has been marginalised, silenced, and how it can be reclaimed as a historical agent and a site of social imagination, I now pose a more fundamental question: how should we rewrite the history of water in Malaysia? I argue that constructing a critical hydrosocial historiography demands more than merely critiquing infrastructure and policy. It requires forging new methodologies capable of capturing the fluid, multivalent, and insurgent nature of water within Malaysia's social, cultural, and political landscapes. In other words, we must write the history of water with methodologies as fluid, adaptable, and vital as water itself.

The first problem to address is the over-reliance on colonial and postcolonial official archives. As scholars like Stoler (2009) and Burton (ed.) (2005) have argued, archives are not passive repositories of information but active sites of power spaces where what is knowable and memorable has already been filtered through the political and economic logics of the colonisers and the modern nation-state. In Malaysia's case, records from the Public Work Department, dam construction documents, and irrigation planning reports present water predominantly as a technical resource, erasing the social, spiritual, and cultural histories interwoven with it (Abdullah 2024). Therefore, I argue that any new water historiography must begin by reading these archives "against the grain", excavating not only what is stated but also what is silenced; interrogating not only successful projects but also failures, refusals, and resistances that were deliberately undocumented.

However, archival re-reading alone is insufficient. We must expand our historical sources to include forms that have long been marginalised in conventional academic historiography. Oral narratives, folk poetry, customary water laws, bathing rituals, and water worship practices must be recognised as valid historical texts. This necessitates acknowledging that history resides not only in written documents but also in collective memory, social practices, and environmental landscapes. Methods such as oral history, memory mapping, and ethnohistorical reconstruction must become integral to researching Malaysia's water histories (Carr 2018: Mohd Noor 2006: Ibrahim 2013: Thompson 2017). Among Orang Asli communities, for instance, rivers are mapped not merely geographically but also through ancestral journeys, sacred sites, and customary boundaries. These constitute different forms of history, histories that do not align with colonial timelines but are rooted in the lived experiences of communities (Swainson & McGregor 2008).

Moreover, I propose that water historical methodologies must integrate environmental analysis more seriously. Water is not merely a backdrop to human history; it is an active historical actor. The approach of historical political ecology offers critical tools for understanding how changes in water regimes such as river diversions, dam constructions, and land reclamation have transformed power structures, community relations, and cultural orientations. Studying flood cycles, drought patterns, and riverine ecological shifts can provide new perspectives on how water shaped economic systems, migrations, and local politics. In this framing, water is no longer a passive object of history, but a dynamic subject reshaping human trajectories (Radojevic & Bashkin 2007).

Another crucial dimension in building a hydrosocial historiography is the willingness to confront the greed, conflict, and inequalities entwined with water's history. We must move beyond writing about irrigation development as a "national success story" without asking who bore the social costs who was displaced, who lost riparian rights, who became marginalised after rivers were tamed in the name of development. Water history must be conflictual, reflecting the reality that this seemingly natural resource has always been a battleground between states, between communities, and between people and institutions.

In forging this new approach, I propose the notion of a "fluid historiography" an approach that does not seek uniformity or linear narratives but accepts that water histories, like water itself, curve, layer, diverge, and resist control. This means writing histories that allow multiple voices, the colonial administrator, the paddy farmer, the village headman, the woman at the river, the Orang Asli child to co-exist without forcing them into a singular narrative of progress or failure. Fluid historiography also implies making space for emotions, imaginations, and sensory experiences in constructing historical accounts, recognising how the smell of river mud, the sound of flowing water, or the grief over a lost spring can be legitimate historical sources.

I recognise that such an approach would require a substantial transformation in how history is taught at universities, how archives are curated, and how historical research is funded and evaluated. It demands dismantling the walls separating social history, environmental history, anthropology, development studies, and literature. Yet I believe this is the necessary challenge if we are serious about liberating Malaysia's water history from the epistemological shackles of colonialism and restoring it to the complexity of human experiences.

Ultimately, I argue that developing a hydrosocial historiography is not merely an academic endeavour; it is a matter of epistemic and political justice. In an era where water crises are becoming urgent global issues, critically understanding water histories is vital not only for interpreting the past but for building a more just, sustainable, and human-centred future. A genuinely Malaysian water history must flow not from the reservoirs of statistical data but from the springs of memory, lived experiences, and the ongoing struggles resonating within our rivers and communities today.

WATER AS AN ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVE: REREADING MEMORY, RESISTANCE, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN MALAYSIA

Having explored the necessity of liberating water from colonial frameworks, reimagining it as a political agent, and proposing new hydrosocial historiographical methodologies, I now wish to advance the discussion to a more radical plane: viewing water itself as a form of alternative archive. I argue that, within the context of Malaysian history, water is not merely an object of narratives but a living source of knowledge, a dynamic archive recording traces of power, resistance, trauma, and possibility beyond the boundaries of official state documentation. In this sense, I propose that writing Malaysia's water history necessitates approaching water as liquid memory, as a text that can be read, interpreted, and contested in its struggle against the hegemony of colonial and technocratic-nationalist epistemologies.

In conventional historiography, archives are typically associated with written documents, legislation, official reports, and maps produced by state institutions. However, critical archival theory such as Derrida (1996) has demonstrated that the archive is not merely a collection of information but a political space that determines who has the right to remember and who is compelled to forget. In this context, water as a material phenomenon offers a different kind of archive: not one that is static or frozen, but one that is constantly flowing, shifting, and resisting the monopolisation of knowledge. Rivers whose courses were altered by dam construction, valleys submerged for hydroelectric projects, and springs dried up due to industrial exploitation, all carry within them the imprints of human experiences, even if they were never inscribed in official records (Richter et al. 1996).

I contend that to read water as an alternative archive, we must train our historical sensibilities to attend to small signs, ecological transformations, and oral narratives surrounding rivers, springs, and catchment areas. Stories of villages lost to dam projects, of customary water laws violated by modern regulations, or of annual rituals venerating rivers all constitute layers of archives distinct from technical reports measuring flow rates and reservoir capacities. This demands reading not only with the eyes but with emotions, with the senses, and with the readiness to acknowledge that many forms of water-related historical experience cannot be neatly categorised within the rational frameworks of modernity.

In many cases, communities living alongside rivers, lakes, and springs act as custodians of these water archives. Among Malaysia's Orang Asli communities, for instance, knowledge of rivers is transmitted not merely through cartographic mapping but through ancestral migration narratives, sacred locations, customary taboos, and spiritual injunctions. When a river is diverted or polluted, it is not only the physical ecology that changes; the entire network of cosmological meaning, social relations, and collective identity is disrupted. Thus, reading water history demands that we examine not just how water was utilised, but how it was lived, governed, contested, and dreamt of (Swainson & McGregor 2008).

I also perceive water as a medium for remembering trauma. Many large-scale water development projects in Malaysia have left profound psychological and cultural scars. The Bakun Dam project, for example, did not merely displace Dayak communities from their ancestral lands; it also annihilated collective memories of the homeland as an integrated living space tied to water (Keong 2005). Rivers once intimately known, loved, and mythologised became unrecognisable expanses of deep, still water. In this context, water ceases to be merely a resource; it becomes a site of grief, nostalgia, and resistance. Writing Malaysia's water history must have the courage to traverse these traumas, not treating them as "collateral damage" of development but recognising them as central historical experiences.

Yet water also opens spaces for new forms of political subjectivity (Mollinga 2008). Despite the structural violence of water development, communities often forge micro-forms of resistance: opposing forced relocations, reclaiming riparian rights, revitalising river rituals, or orally documenting threatened river histories. These acts, though seemingly small, form hydrosocial insurgencies that challenge state and corporate narratives of water usage. In this sense, water becomes a site for reimagining human-environment relationships not based on domination and exploitation but rooted in memory, responsibility, and solidarity.

I argue that by reading water as an alternative archive, we can liberate Malaysia's water histories from the narrow frames that have long imprisoned them. We can create space for writing histories that do not simply celebrate engineering achievements but also acknowledge losses, regrets, and unrealised dreams. We can build water narratives that flow alongside the experiences of those who have lived with water not merely those who have controlled it.

In this context, a critical and postcolonial Malaysian water historiography must learn to read rivers not simply as hydraulic channels but as social texts; to hear the rush of water not merely as background noise but as echoes of collective memory; to understand landscape changes not merely as development episodes but as chapters in human struggles over loss and the search for meaning.Ultimately, I believe that if we succeed in cultivating an awareness of water as an alternative archive, we will enrich our understanding not only of water history but of Malaysian history itself. Behind every flowing river, every dam constructed, and every spring lost, there lies a story of power, loss, resilience, and hope that must be written, read, and felt anew with a justice and sensitivity that the official archives have long denied.

WATER AND EPISTEMIC POWER: REIMAGINING THE GEOGRAPHY OF KNOWLEDGE IN MALAYSIAN HISTORY

In the previous subtopics, I have traced how water has been marginalised, silenced, and how it can be reclaimed as a historical agent through alternative hydrosocial imaginations. Now, in this section, I advance a deeper and more conceptual argument: that the history of water in Malaysia must be understood not merely as a history of resources, technology, or development, but as part of the formation of epistemic power, that is, the power to determine what can be known, how it can be known, and who is entitled to know. I argue that water has not only been subjected to material or ecological colonisation; it has also been subjected to epistemic colonisation. Only by understanding this dimension can we truly liberate Malaysia's water history from the shadow of colonialism (Abdullah 2019).

Under colonial frameworks, the geography of water was transformed not only physically but conceptually. Rivers that once served as cosmological arteries for local communities were remapped through European cartographic logics: as flows, catchment areas, or political borders. Springs that had once been venerated as sources of life were reduced to points on a map, measured for their capacity and assessed for economic utility (D'Souza 2006). This process was part of what Edward Said termed "imperial knowledge", where colonisation of land and bodies was accompanied by colonisation of how societies understood their spaces and resources. In this sense, water was not merely managed; it was "possessed" through a new regime of meaning that displaced precolonial and indigenous epistemologies (Said 1978: Said 2012).

I contend that the inheritance of colonial knowledge about water continues, often unconsciously, in how the postcolonial Malaysian state governs and understands its water resources. The National Water Resources Policy, water rights legislation, and river development plans all converge around a technocratic language that separates water from society, culture, and history. This language of resource management is not neutral; it emerges from a particular historical trajectory that renders water a technical object rather than a social-historical agent. Consequently, alternative forms of knowledge about water, myths of sacred rivers, customary water practices, or river cosmologies embedded in local cultures are marginalised as "tradition" or "belief", dismissed as incompatible with the modern logic of development.

In this context, I argue that the project of developing a critical water historiography in Malaysia must be understood as part of a broader effort to decolonise the geography of knowledge itself. We cannot merely rewrite water history; we must rewrite how we know water. This demands recognising that forms of knowledge deemed "invalid" within modern frameworks often contain profound understandings of the human-water relationship. Re-envisioning water through a decolonial lens requires acknowledging rivers not merely as hydraulic systems but as political meeting grounds; lakes not merely as reservoirs but as collective memoryscapes; rain not merely as hydrological input but as part of broader cosmologies and value systems.

I propose that to build a truly water historiography for Malaysia, we must re-anchor the "geography of knowledge" about water in local experience and imagination. This means theorising hydrosocial relations from Southeast Asia itself, not merely importing concepts from Europe or America. It means writing water history not just through dam data and irrigation schemes but also through oral narratives, river myths, customary water rights, and human emotional experiences with water. It means recognising that water can be understood through multiple epistemological regimes, scientific, cosmological, ritual, embodied, and memorial.

Within this framework, I see the need for a pluriversal epistemology towards Malaysia's water history, an approach where multiple ways of knowing water coexist and intersect, rather than being forced into a homogenised modern scientific model. As Escobar (2018) has argued, decolonisation is not merely about rejecting the West but about embracing the existence of multiple worlds of knowledge the pluriverse that need to be reactivated. In the context of water, this means writing a history where rivers can simultaneously be irrigation channels, trade routes, political borders, spiritual

spaces, and sites of social struggle depending on who speaks, from where they speak, and through what experiences they connect with water.

Ultimately, I argue that freeing water from epistemic hegemony is not merely an academic imperative; it is crucial for ecological and social justice. In an era of climate change, water scarcity, and escalating resource conflicts, understanding water not just as data but as a field of meaning and social power is essential for building a more sustainable and equitable future. By liberating water narratives from colonial frameworks, we also liberate ourselves from historical shadows that constrict our imagination, from submission to development models that sever humans from nature, and from the confusion about our most fundamental relationship with the source of life itself. In this sense, reimagining water is not merely an act of historical recovery; it is an act of liberation. Rewriting Malaysia's water history is not simply about filling gaps in existing knowledge; it is about reclaiming the right to dream of a future where water and the communities who depend upon it, can once again flow freely, equitably, and sovereignly.

EPILOGUE

In tracing the larger theme of the marginalisation of water within Malaysian historiography, it becomes clear that this issue is not merely about the absence of a topic in historical writing; rather, it reflects deeper structures of epistemic power that have operated since the colonial era. Water, once central to the social, cosmological, and political life of local communities, has been reduced to a technical object within colonial discourses, a view that continues to be unconsciously inherited by the structures of the postcolonial Malaysian state. Through the discussions presented, I argue that to reconstruct a just and reflective water historiography for Malaysia, we must move beyond merely adding a new theme to the official historical narrative. Instead, we must undertake a radical deconstruction of the epistemological frameworks that govern how we know and write about water.

Critical water historiography must begin by excavating the colonial legacies embedded within the management and understanding of water. We must reread colonial archives not simply to uncover new information but to expose the logics of domination inscribed within them. Reading "against the grain" becomes an essential strategy to recover the silenced voices, those of displaced communities, forgotten water rituals, and marginalised local ecological knowledges. Simultaneously, it must be acknowledged that official archives are incapable of capturing the full spectrum of water's historical traces; therefore, expanding historical methodology to include oral narratives, collective memory, ritual practices, and emotional relationships with water becomes an urgent necessity.

I argue that water must be understood not simply as a resource but as a dynamic social and political field. Water history is a history of conflict, negotiation, loss, and resistance. Rivers that were redirected, dams that submerged villages, and springs that vanished under the weight of industrial development represent not merely physical transformations but profound restructurings of power relations and social meanings. In this context, water functions as a historical agent an active subject that shapes, and is shaped by, human relations, politics, and cosmology. In envisioning water as an alternative archive, I have emphasised the importance of approaching rivers, lakes, and springs as sites of collective memory, trauma, and subjectivity. Through this approach, we can recover narratives of displacement, the alteration of human-environment relationships, and micro-acts of resistance against state and corporate logics of domination. Allowing water to "speak" through geographical traces, ecological transformations, and local storytelling opens a space for reading history from perspectives long relegated to the margins.

At the conceptual level, I assert that Malaysia's water history cannot be disentangled from the politics of epistemic power. The ways we have come to know water through maps, statistics, and development policies have long been shaped by colonial logics and perpetuated by the postcolonial state. To liberate water from these constraints, we must develop a new epistemological approach that recognises multiple ways of knowing water: scientific, cosmological, ritualistic, embodied, and mnemonic. It requires revitalising indigenous cosmologies of water, recognising community rights to

their hydrosocial knowledge, and allowing diverse voices about water to coexist without being forced into a singular developmentalist narrative.

Decolonising water in this sense is not merely an academic exercise; it is a political and ecological imperative. In an era marked by climate crisis, water scarcity, and intensifying global resource conflicts, critically understanding water histories is crucial not only for interpreting the past but for envisioning a more just and sustainable future. Writing and reading Malaysia's water history critically thus becomes not a luxury but a necessity one grounded in the pursuit of epistemic justice and ecological resilience.The Malaysian water history I envision is one that flows, a history not confined by the boundaries of official archives, not frozen within modern categorical thinking, and not fearful of acknowledging the ruptures, losses, and griefs borne by water transformations. It is a history that allows water to be what it truly is: a force that connects, divides, remembers, rebels, and imagines. By restoring water as a historical subject, we also restore a part of our collective self long forgotten beneath dry riverbeds, under the still surfaces of artificial lakes, and within the shadowy statistics of developmentalist triumph. Thus, I call for Malaysian historiography to no longer relegate water as a minor or supplementary theme but to elevate it as a critical lens through which to reread the nation's entire history: a history of how humans relate to the sources of life, how power structures those relations, and how memory can reactivate hope for a more just and dignified future.

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