Reimagining Animism: The Ecocritical Psyche In Malay Folklore

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex interplay between human consciousness, nature, and spiritual realms in folklore from the Malay world through the lens of the ecocritical psyche. By reimagining animism beyond colonialist interpretations, the study reveals a worldview where the psyche extends into the environment, and life, death, morality, and community are interconnected across vertical and horizontal axes. The vertical axis governs transitions between realms, with ancestors, death, and spiritual beliefs exemplifying the reciprocal relationship between the living and the spiritual world. In contrast, the horizontal axis highlights the community's responsibility to maintain harmony, reflected through rituals like the *Turun Ka Bondang* ceremony and Ritual of Sebayuh. Through analyses of tales such as "Buwaya" and "Kangkuksa Pelesit," the paper also demonstrates how forces of good and evil are intertwined with cultural, ecological, and psychological dimensions. Fundamentally, Malay animism, as reflected in these stories, offers a sophisticated system of ecological and psychological integration, where balance is not fixed but actively cultivated. This study affirms that sustainable relationships with the natural world, spiritual realms, and communal life are essential for psychological wholeness and ecological harmony in the Malay cosmos.

Keywords: Ecocritical psyche, Malay folklore, Animism, Jungian psychology

Introduction: Animism and the Dual-Axis Structure of the Malay Cosmos

Animism in Malay folklore is not merely a spiritual belief but a sophisticated worldview that interweaves human consciousness, ecology, and the unseen forces of the cosmos. As a system of meaning-making, it reflects an understanding of the natural world as alive and interconnected, where rivers, mountains, animals, and spirits form a network of reciprocal relationships. More than a religious framework, Malay animism functions as a cultural and

psychological model in which the self is never isolated but is always embedded within broader ecological and spiritual networks.

However, animism has historically been misinterpreted, particularly through the lens of colonialist and Western intellectual traditions. Edward Tylor's 1871 definition of animism as a "primitive" belief system where souls were "foolishly" thought to reside in inanimate objects (Tylor 36) reflects a Cartesian dualist perspective that separates the human mind from the material world. This reductionist view persisted well into the 20th century, deeming animism to be at the lower end of a hierarchical religious classification as the "religion" of the unschooled and uncivilized (von Stuckrad 18). While some revisionist scholars such as von Stuckrad view the traditional Western construct of animism as dismissing animistic worldviews as pre-scientific or irrational, failing to recognise the profound psychological and ecological logic within indigenous animistic systems, Linda Hogan points out that the term "animism" itself was a western construct that was a means of categorizing beliefs that did not fit within the Western framework of religion and science (18). She argues that whilst the term 'animism' begins to engage with non-Western ways of knowing, it does not do justice to the deeply embedded lifeways and knowledges of the communities it describes (Hogan 18). Western definitions of animism often impose a rigid, external categorisation when actually animism is not a belief in supernatural agency but rather a way of experiencing and relating to the world, where humans and non-humans exist in a continuous, dynamic exchange.

This paper reimagines Malay animism through the ecocritical psyche, a concept drawn from Jungian psychology, and ecological literary criticism that foregrounds the interconnectedness of psyche, culture, and environment. Susan Rowland's work in ecocritical depth psychology affirms that the psyche is not confined to individual consciousness but extends outward, shaping and being shaped by the external world. Through this lens, the

folkloric tales of the Malay world become sites where the psychological, ecological, and cosmological converge—where spirits, ancestors, and nature form an integrated system of existence.

To better understand the structure of the Malay cosmos as reflected in these narratives, this paper introduces a dual-axis framework that organises the interaction between the spiritual, ecological, and human realms (see Figure 1).

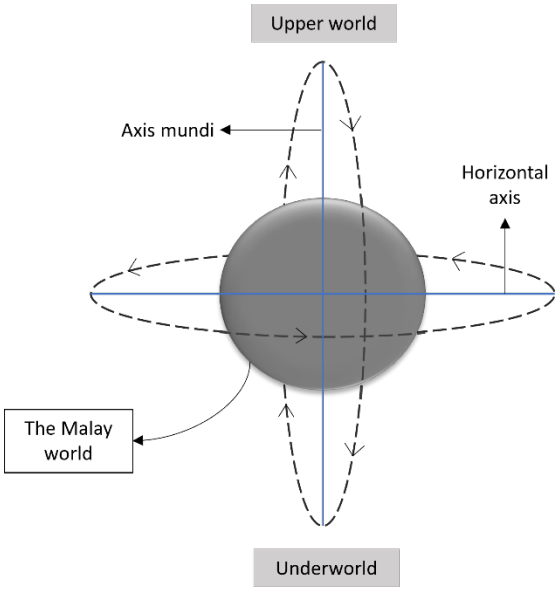

Figure 1. Authors' interpretation of the structure of the Malay cosmos as depicted in Malay folklore.

This structure is conceptualised through Mircea Eliade's notion of the Axis Mundi, which describes a central spiritual axis connecting different planes of existence—the heavens (upperworld), the earth, and the underworld (*Images and Symbols* 48). In the Malay cosmos, this vertical axis is reflected in towering natural features such as trees and mountains, aligning with the concept that they serve as "portals for communication between the human, the divine, and the natural world" (Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* 113). This idea is embedded in Malay animistic narratives, such as the Haup Malat myth that will be discussed later, where the cosmic tree serves as the structural centre of creation, linking the unseen realm to the material world. This myth, along with various animistic practices, demonstrates that the

spiritual world is not an abstract dimension but an actively present force, operating through ancestral spirits, deities, and cosmic energies along the vertical axis.

While Eliade's Axis Mundi focuses solely on the vertical connections between the heavens, earth, and underworld, this paper extends his framework by introducing the horizontal dimension specific to the Malay cosmos. The horizontal axis represents the realm where the interactions between humans, spirits, and nature occur in a reciprocal network. Unlike the hierarchical spiritual structure of the vertical axis, which governs moral order and ancestral authority, the horizontal axis is concerned with communal memories and traditions and the dynamic interplay between the living and the environment. In this dual-axis framework, the vertical and horizontal dimensions are beyond spatial segregations; they function dependently as a single cosmological system where both axes are constantly in dialogue, shaping the ways communities navigate existence.

The content of this paper follows a structural approach aligned with these two axes:

1. The Ensouled Cosmos, which lays the foundation for the animistic worldview through the concept of *semangat* (life force), totemism, and the process of soul-making.
2. The Vertical Axis, which examines ancestors, spirits, death, and the moral balance between good and evil.
3. The Horizontal Axis, which explores rituals, ecological responsibility, and cultural memory as tools for maintaining harmony.
4. A synthesis of both axes, demonstrating that Malay animism is a unified system of meaning-making that integrates psyche, culture, and environment.

By foregrounding these axes as an organising framework, this paper seeks to clarify how Malay animism functions as a cosmological, psychological, and ecological model that

challenges dominant Western ontologies. Through its dynamic interplay between realms, Malay animism offers a vision of existence in which humans, spirits, and nature are not separate entities but co-participants in a shared reality.

Defining the Malay World: Cultural and Geographical Boundaries

The Malay World, as conceptualised in this paper, refers to a broad cultural and linguistic sphere encompassing the Austronesian-speaking peoples of Southeast Asia, rather than a singular ethnic category. While the term "Malay" is often associated with the Malay ethnic group in present-day Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore, its cultural and historical significance extends far beyond modern national borders. Malay identity, language, and folklore have long functioned as interwoven cultural elements across diverse Austronesian societies, shaping shared traditions, cosmologies, and oral narratives.

The cultural and linguistic unity of the Malay World is deeply rooted in Austronesian migration patterns, which shaped the development of the region. According to Peter Bellwood's study on Austronesian dispersal, the Austronesian-speaking peoples originated from Taiwan and southern China, migrating southward through the Philippines and into the Indonesian and Malaysian archipelagos, eventually expanding as far as Madagascar in the west and Polynesia in the east. This migration, which began around 4,000–5,000 years ago, led to the development of shared linguistic, agricultural, and cultural practices across the region (Bellwood, *Austronesian Prehistory in Southeast Asia* 2-3; ---, *The Early Movements* 69). The Malay language, as part of the larger Austronesian language family, reflects this history of movement and interaction, serving as a lingua franca across maritime Southeast Asia for centuries.

The cultural identity of the Malay World has been shaped by centuries of interaction and assimilation between indigenous animistic traditions and external influences. The Hindu-Buddhist cosmologies of the Srivijaya (7th–13th century) and Majapahit (13th–16th century) kingdoms spread across the Malay Archipelago, leaving enduring imprints on its spiritual and philosophical frameworks. With the rise of the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century, Islam became a dominant cultural force, further shaping literary, social, and religious traditions (Wallace 445). Rather than replacing earlier belief systems, these influences assimilated into existing indigenous worldviews, resulting in a layered and syncretic cultural landscape. This synthesis is evident in Malay folklore, where animistic elements coexist alongside Hindu-Buddhist mythologies and Islamic cosmologies, creating a uniquely amalgamated system of meaning-making. The enduring presence of spirits, ancestral beings, and sacred landscapes within Malay animistic traditions reflects this deep historical continuity, where older indigenous beliefs remain embedded within evolving cultural frameworks.

ii) Malay Folklore as a Regional Animistic Tradition

The term "Malay folklore" in this paper does not refer exclusively to tales from the ethnic Malay community but rather to a wider corpus of animistic narratives from across the Malay World. Many of these stories originate from indigenous groups within the Austronesian-speaking world, including but not limited to the Kayan, Minangkabau, Javanese, Sumatran, and Jakun peoples, whose folklore exhibits deep cultural affinities with Malay mythologies (Embong et al. 236-238). The inclusion of these diverse traditions reflects a shared animistic worldview—one in which spirits, ancestors, and nature are deeply interwoven into the cosmological order.

By framing Malay folklore within this broader Austronesian sphere, this paper acknowledges the fluid cultural exchanges that have shaped animistic traditions across Southeast Asia. The tales analysed here do not belong to a singular ethnic group but rather to a network of interrelated traditions that reflect the historical, linguistic, and cultural continuities of the region. This approach allows for a more holistic exploration of animism as a cosmological and psychological system, one that transcends modern national and ethnic classifications.

The Ensouled World: Animism as the Foundation of the Malay Cosmos

Malay animism is fundamentally rooted in the belief that the cosmos is ensouled—imbued with a vital life force known as *semangat*. Unlike Western materialist traditions that separate consciousness from the external world, Malay cosmology envisions a world in which humans, nature, and spirits are interconnected through shared vitality and agency. As Khalid-Taib explains, the concept of *semangat* extends beyond human beings to encompass animals, plants, and even seemingly inanimate elements such as rocks and water, creating a universe where all things participate in an ongoing cycle of life, death, and renewal (189). In this worldview, entities of the natural world are broadly classified as human-people and nonhuman-people and "they can be spoken *with*. Objects, by contrast, are spoken *about*" (Khalid-Taib 255). This distinction underscores the relational and social nature of being in Malay animism, where all ensouled entities exhibit intentionality and agency, though with varying degrees of autonomy and freedom. Essentially, this belief system is neither passive nor abstract; it is actively sustained through rituals, myths, and cultural practices that reinforce the reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment.

From an ecocritical psyche perspective, this worldview dissolves the boundary between psyche and nature, positioning the natural world as both a mirror and extension of human consciousness. Developed by Susan Rowland, the ecocritical psyche emerges from Jungian psychology, extending Carl Jung's concept of the unconscious beyond the individual mind to encompass the natural world as an active participant in meaning-making. Rowland challenges the traditional notion that psyche exists in isolation, proposing that the environment itself "thinks" alongside the human mind, shaping and being shaped by it (*The Ecocritical Psyche* 24). Within this framework, animistic worldviews offer an alternative to Western dualism, as they do not separate mental life from the external world but instead engage with nature as an ensouled, relational entity.

Contemporary scholarship recognises that animism functions as a sophisticated mode of engagement between the human psyche and the non-human world. As Graham Harvey notes in his work on New Animism, animistic cultures do not merely believe in a world filled with spirits but *actively* engage with non-human entities as persons with agency and meaning (97). This dynamic interplay between the human and nonhuman realms reflects the ecocritical psyche theory of projection, where the psyche externalises its unconscious contents onto the material world, shaping symbolic relationships with nature. Rowland further argues that this process is not one-directional; the natural world also "speaks back" to the psyche, engaging in a reciprocal exchange that shapes both human identity and ecological awareness (*CG Jung in the Humanities* 63).

In this way, the ecocritical psyche framework challenges the anthropocentric tendency to view nature as a passive backdrop for human experience. Instead, it reveals a dialogic relationship in which the landscape, spirits, and psychological archetypes co-create meaning. Within the ensouled world of Malay animism, this is evident in how totems, ancestors, and

spirits act as both ecological markers and psychological projections, embodying the interdependence between mental, spiritual, and environmental realms.

i) The Haup Malat Myth and the Creation of Totemic Soul-Making

One of the clearest expressions of this ensouled cosmos is the Malay understanding of totems, which function as primordial life-giving entities that sustain the balance between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. In many animistic traditions, totems serve as symbols of kinship and spiritual identity, linking human communities to the natural world through ancestral affiliations. However, in Malay cosmology, totems are more than ancestral emblems—they are soul-makers, infusing the cosmos with *semangat* (life force) and shaping the very fabric of existence.

A compelling example of this totemic soul-making process appears in the *Haup Malat* (World Tree) myth of the Kayan river people of East Malaysia and West Indonesia. This creation myth demonstrates a regional animistic framework of the Malay cosmology where the relationship between spiritual forces, ecology, and ancestry is deeply interwoven. It envisions the world emerging from a primordial expanse of water and clouds, symbolising the undifferentiated unconscious before the formation of distinct existence. Within this boundless space, the myth recounts a floating river as clear as glass, existing autonomously without a source. This portrayal elevates the river beyond a physical body of water, transforming it into an archetypal cosmic origin point that contains the source of life. Its endless flow and clarity suggest infinite potential and the foundational essence of *semangat*, the life force that will later animate the entire cosmos. Above it, aimless clouds drift, representing the fluid, shape-shifting nature of existence. In the Malay cosmos, where the cycle of birth, life, and dissolution is central, the clouds embody the transient, ever-changing aspect of the universe. Their

formlessness highlights the idea that existence is fluid and in constant motion—nothing remains static, and all forms are subject to transformation or dissolution.

From the ecocritical psyche lens, this imagery reflects the collective unconscious, where "archetypal symbols (i.e. the river and the clouds) represent deep-seated human experiences" (Rowland, *Remembering Dionysus* 75). Together, the river and clouds in this myth symbolise the cosmic source—an active and generative space where existence is in constant flux, containing both permanence and transience. Like a primordial vessel, it holds the raw materials of being, where thoughts, emotions, and archetypal energies emerge and dissolve within the collective unconscious.

The first rupture of this primordial balance occurs with the sudden appearance of a rock, which disrupts the river's flow. Descending from the clouds, the rock anchors itself within the river, initiating the first act of individuation—the moment when form emerges from formlessness. The rock's piercing through the clouds creates a hole, allowing rain to fall, symbolising the descent of spirit into matter. When struck by rain, the rock becomes fertile ground for the first forms of life, beginning with the formation of slime that gives rise to small worms called *halang*. These worms multiply and burrow into the rock, leaving behind fine sand, which accumulates over time. The rock then transforms into soil, forming an island, from which the World Tree, Haup Malat, emerges.

The Haup Malat tree, with its branches extending in all directions, gives rise to different species. Falling leaves transform into birds and insects, while those reaching the water become aquatic creatures. The World Tree serves as both a cosmic structure (Axis Mundi) and as a psychological symbol, embodying the interdependence between nature, psyche, and spirit. Within this animistic framework, each part of the tree holds symbolic significance:

- The roots, embedded in the earth, represent the ancestral past and subconscious memory.
- The trunk, linking the ground to the sky, reflects the vertical axis of existence, connecting humans to the spiritual realm.
- The branches and leaves, extending outward, symbolise the horizontal axis, encompassing the ecological and social networks that sustain life.

Ultimately, in this myth, the river totem of the Kayan people functions as the bridge between the realms of ancestry, ecology, and spirituality, forming a continuum between past, present, and future. Alongside the rock and the tree, it represents the stages of cosmic individuation and the infusion of *semangat*:

- The River → The central totem with primordial source of life, mirroring the collective unconscious in which all potential forms exist.
- The Rock →The first differentiation, marking the transition from fluidity to structure, unconscious to conscious form.
- The Tree →The Axis Mundi containing the generative life force that animates all beings and binds them together.

In an extended version of the myth from West Kalimantan called *Burong Iri Burong Ringgong*, the soul-making process expands to include the creation of humans, reinforcing the idea that humans are not separate from the cosmos but emerge as part of its vibrant tapestry of life. This suggests that human existence is not an act of domination over nature but a reciprocal relationship within an ensouled universe. The myth tells how among the birds that emerge from

the Haup Malat tree, two stand apart: Iri, a bird of pure white light, and Ringgong, a bird with the vibrant hues of a sunset. Their beauty and luminance symbolise the richness of existence, yet they long for companions who can sing, tell stories, and dream—beings who can actively participate in the cosmos.

The birds' first attempt at creation involves moulding figures from clay, but the forms dry too quickly and crumble. Searching for a substance that can imbue these figures with life, they discover that the Haup Malat tree "bleeds" a deep red sap. This sap, symbolising blood and the essence of *semangat*, serves as the vital ingredient that animates the clay figures and transforms them into two living human beings. However, these beings are not anatomically complete yet; they possess only a head and part of a body with arms. As they drag themselves across the earth, they gradually absorb the land's energies, completing their bodily formation over time.

This extension of the *Haup Malat* myth deepens its significance in two ways. First, the process by which the clay figures take shape—gradually absorbing the *semangat* of the land—suggests that selfhood is not an inherent quality but one that emerges through participation in an ensouled world. Human identity is not an isolated, autonomous construct but something shaped through continuous interaction with nature, ancestors, and spirit. Just as the clay figures remain incomplete without the essence of the tree, the psyche, too, does not exist in a vacuum; it is formed through a dynamic relationship with the land, the unseen forces, and the ancestral spirits that animate existence. Second, the myth enacts the very principle that the psyche is not confined to the human but extends outward, forming relationships with the world around it. As Rowland argues, myths function as ecological mediators, revealing how selfhood is always co-constructed through engagement with the more-than-human world (*The Ecocritical Psyche* 138). The birds, acting as totemic intermediaries, do not impose life onto the clay figures but

instead search for an animating force within the natural world. Their actions reflect a deeply embedded animistic understanding of life as relational rather than hierarchical, where meaning arises through continuous exchange between the human, non-human, and spiritual realms. In this way, the myth itself mirrors the ecocritical psyche framework, illustrating how the formation of human identity is inseparable from the landscapes, beings, and stories that sustain it.

The myth of Burong Iri Burong Ringgong, therefore, is more than just an extended story—it functions as an archetypal model for how the psyche must recognise its interdependence with nature in order to fully form. Unlike Western traditions that position human identity as distinct from the nonhuman world, Malay cosmology presents a model where lineage is not only passed down through bloodlines but also through spiritual and ecological inheritance. Totems, ancestors, and the landscape itself act as carriers of memory, psyche, and *semangat*, reinforcing the idea that human consciousness is never separate from the greater web of life but is always in a state of becoming, shaped by the rhythms of the natural world.

ii) Animism as an Ecological and Psychological Framework

The ensouled world of Malay folklore is thus both a cosmology and a psychological system, reinforcing the notion that ecological balance and psychological wholeness are interdependent. *Semangat*, as the animating force, is not fixed but must be actively cultivated through storytelling, rituals, and communal practices that maintain harmony between realms. The presence of totems, spirits, and cosmic structures in these narratives demonstrates that Malay animism does not distinguish between the physical, spiritual, and psychological dimensions of existence—instead, it integrates them into a unified whole.

By recognising this deeply interconnected worldview, this paper affirms that Malay animism offers a model of ecological and psychological integration that is distinct from Western traditions. Rather than viewing nature as a resource to be controlled or an external force to be feared, Malay animism invites participation, negotiation, and reciprocity between all beings. This dynamic relationship, reflected in myths such as *Haup Malat* and *Burong Iri Burong Ringgong*, establishes the foundation upon which the vertical and horizontal axes of the Malay cosmos are built.

The following sections will explore these two axes in greater detail, illustrating how animistic narratives navigate the realms of spirits, ancestors, and cosmic forces (vertical axis), as well as rituals, ecological relationships, and cultural practices (horizontal axis). Through this dual structure, Malay folklore reveals an integrated system of meaning-making, where spiritual, ecological, and psychological dimensions are always in conversation.

The Vertical Axis: Ancestors, Spirits, and the Cosmic Order

The presence of unseen forces in Malay folklore is not incidental but fundamental to maintaining the moral and ecological equilibrium of existence. Harvey describes animistic worldviews as inherently relational, where spirits and humans exist in continuous exchange rather than occupying separate realms (56). This structure of interconnection is central to Malay cosmology, in which unseen forces are deeply embedded in everyday life. Spirits and ancestral beings are not merely passive remnants of the dead; they retain authority, influence, and the power to govern cosmic justice.

In many Malay animistic traditions, the soul of the deceased does not simply disappear but remains within the structure of the vertical axis, continuing to oversee moral conduct, the natural world, and the spiritual order. This is why ancestral veneration and spirit appeasement

are vital ritual practices in the Malay world—failure to honour these forces risks disturbing the cosmic equilibrium, resulting in misfortune, illness, or even ecological disruption.

i) The Batu Pong Ka Pong Myth and the Social Anchor of the Vertical Axis

The function of the vertical axis as a moral and spiritual structure is evident in Malay myths, where ancestral beings are often depicted as guardians. These spirits serve as both protectors and enforcers, exerting influence over natural forces and social order to ensure the balance between realms is maintained. In this way, the vertical axis is not just a metaphysical structure but also a psychological and social framework.

A myth that exemplifies the role of an ancestral social protector is *Batu Pong Ka Pong* (The Pong Ka Pong Rock), a Minangkabau tale centred on the veneration of the female water buffalo as an ancestor endowed with the archetype of the Earth Mother. The colossal female buffalo, known as *Bundo Kaduang* (which translates to "mother of the land"), embodies both the nurturing and protective qualities of the Earth, acting as an anchor that connects the people to their land, lineage, matrilineal inheritance, and the cosmic balance upheld by the vertical axis.

In the cosmogonic structure of the Batu Pong Ka Pong myth, the Earth is pictured as being sustained by *Bundo Kaduang*, who precariously balances it on her horns. When her right horn tires, she tosses the Earth into the air and catches it with her left horn, and the ongoing tossing causes little earthquakes that lead to the creation of fertile land for the people. This continuous movement is not chaotic but part of a sacred process of renewal and transformation—just as the buffalo sustains the world, the land must be nurtured and honoured to maintain cosmic balance. The centrality of this figure to the Minangkabau people is reflected in the very name of their community, "Minangkabau," which derives from the word *kabau*, a

regional variation of the Malay word *kerbau* (buffalo). This mythic and ancestral connection is not merely symbolic but extends into the governing principles of their social system—the matrilineal structure of *adat perpatih*. In this system, lineage and property are passed down through the female line, reinforcing the idea that women, like the *Bundo Kaduang*, are the custodians of both the land and ancestral continuity. This structure is not merely a social arrangement but a ritual enactment of the Earth Mother archetype, where women embody life, protection, and guidance, ensuring that both the physical and spiritual realms remain in equilibrium. Through this matrilineal tradition, the Minangkabau people maintain a harmonious balance between ancestral wisdom, ecological responsibility, and communal stability, illustrating how *Bundo Kaduang* functions as both a mythic and social anchor within the vertical axis.

Beyond its archetypal function, the *Batu Pong Ka Pong* myth also reflects a deeper psychological dimension, revealing the profound significance of ancestral connection in shaping cultural identity and spiritual well-being. In animistic traditions, where the cosmos is relational and spirits remain actively engaged with the living, maintaining these ancestral bonds is not merely a cultural practice but a psychic necessity. The maternal buffalo, as both mythic ancestor and cosmic guardian, symbolises not just nurturance but also the responsibility of sustaining this interwoven relationship. This connection, however, is accompanied by an underlying anxiety—a recognition that ancestral ties require continual reinforcement to remain intact.

Within the collective psyche, disruptions to this relationship—whether through neglect, ecological changes, or shifts in cultural traditions—are perceived as threats to both spiritual and communal equilibrium. Rather than serving as passive recollections of cultural memory, myths function as active sites of psychological negotiation, shaping how identity is

formed within ecological and ancestral relationships (70). In this sense, the Batu Pong Ka Pong myth does not narrate a story of loss but instead reflects a worldview where maintaining balance with the ancestral past is an ongoing duty. Because the ancestral-spiritual bond is central to the vertical axis, its continuation depends on communal acts that honour and reaffirm it. These practices ensure that *Bundo Kaduang*'s presence endures within the Minangkabau consciousness, securing her role as both guardian of the cosmos and custodian of the people. The rituals associated with matrilineal inheritance and land stewardship, which embody this sacred duty, will be explored in greater detail in the following discussion of the horizontal axis, where the focus shifts from the cosmic hierarchy of spirits to the material and communal enactment of these beliefs.

ii) The Sang Buwaya Myth and the Threshold Between Life and Death

In Malay cosmology, death is not perceived as an absolute end but rather as a shift in the soul's state of existence, governed by specific spiritual and cosmological principles. The notion that the soul must undergo a transformative passage is deeply embedded in Malay beliefs and ritual practices. De Danaan argues that in Malay healing traditions, death is understood not as annihilation but as a reconfiguration of existence—a transition into another realm that is spatially distinct from yet intrinsically linked to the world of the living (54). This transformation is not automatic; it requires guidance and ritual mediation, ensuring that the soul crosses the threshold without disruption to the cosmic order.

This conceptualisation aligns with the broader Malay mythological framework of death as a journey rather than an end-point. Antoni Klaus, in his study of death and transformation in Southeast Asian folklore, identifies recurring mythic structures in Malay narratives of the afterlife. He notes that Malay death myths often involve a liminal space—a

transitional passage in which the soul must navigate specific trials or encounters before reaching its final state (149). This includes the presence of gateways, boundary keepers, or perilous crossings, reflecting a cosmological logic in which death is both a test and a necessary metamorphosis. Antoni further argues that this transition is not merely spiritual but is enacted through funerary rites and mythic narratives, reinforcing the idea that the dead must be guided through their transformation by both supernatural forces and communal ritual (151).

Besides depicting the soul's posthumous journey as a transformative passage, Malay folklore also reflects on its moral reckoning, wherein the fate of the dead is determined by the forces that govern the transition. Many of these myths emphasise the presence of spiritual intermediaries—beings or entities tasked with guiding souls across the threshold between life and death. One such figure that appears in Malay myths is the crocodile, a creature often associated with both danger and divine judgment. Within this cosmological framework, the crocodile is not merely a predatory force, but a psychopomp—a guardian of the boundary between worlds, ensuring that the passage of the soul unfolds according to the cosmic order. While existing studies on Malay psychopomps remain scarce, Endicott's work on Malay magical beliefs provides a significant foundation for understanding this role. He discusses the concept of an all-pervading force which dictates whether the soul transforms into an ancestral spirit or becomes a restless, malevolent being (187). This framework aligns with the crocodile figure in the myth of *Sang Buwaya* (The Crocodile), whose dual nature as both enforcer and guide mirrors the cosmic principles governing the fate of the dead.

The myth recounts the story of a gargantuan crocodile called Sang Buwaya with a coffin built into its back. This image of Sang Buwaya embodies the ambivalence of death itself—at once fearsome and merciful, destructive and redemptive. Its terrifying presence is felt most acutely when it seeks out the wicked or morally corrupt, opening its gigantic mouth

to bite or swallow them whole, severing their ties to life with a brutal finality. Sang Buwaya's gaping jaws, snapping shut on those deemed morally corrupt or unworthy, reflect the active, forceful nature of death. In contrast, Sang Buwaya offers a gentler transition to the elderly, the long-suffering, and children, inviting them to rest in the coffin on its back. This merciful transition symbolizes a release from worldly suffering, inviting the soul to leave behind the burdens of existence and enter the next realm in peace.

The crocodile's act of selection encapsulates what Rowland describes as an Ecopsychological metamorphosis—a process where the individual psyche dissolves into the greater ecological and spiritual flow. Rather than asserting a fixed personal identity in the afterlife, the soul surrenders to natural cycles, becoming part of the continuous rhythm of life and death (*Remembering Dionysus* 169-171). This is particularly evident in Sang Buwaya's choice of the elderly, the long-suffering, and children. The elderly, having traversed the full spectrum of life, are granted a natural return to the ecological cycle, much like organic decay nourishing new growth. Similarly, those who have endured prolonged suffering find release in death, reflecting nature's capacity for renewal and healing. The premature death of children, while tragic, offers a poignant reminder of unfulfilled potential in both human life and nature. Just as new buds may fall before they bloom, the premature death of children represents lost potential in the physical world, but nature ensures continuity by carrying that potential forward into the spiritual realm.

Sang Buwaya's dual role—both as an executor of divine justice and a compassionate guide—positions the myth as a moral framework that reinforces ethical behaviour through spiritual consequences. It not only reinforces De Danaan's (1984) argument that death is not an arbitrary event, but also underscores the inescapable link between morality and the afterlife. In doing so, the myth presents the threshold between life and death as an active, liminal

transition shaped by ethical reckoning, where the fate of the soul is determined by its alignment with cosmic order. This interplay between morality and transition highlights how natural entities function as mediators of passage, mirroring the ecological cycles that sustain both human and non-human existence.

iii) The Kangkuksa Pelesit Myth and the Forces of Evil

The conceptualisation of demonic entities in Malay folklore serves as a pivotal juncture for understanding how malevolent forces arise from disturbances in moral and cosmic balance. These demonic figures, often referred to as *mambang* in Malay cosmology, are not inherently evil but are the by-products of ruptured harmony. As Farouk Yahya explains in his study on Malay divination, *mambang* emerge from souls of individuals who died violently or unjustly, and only become supernatural agents when their spirits are disturbed and manipulated through black magic rituals (26-28). Examples include the Toyol (a green, bald and naked childlike *mambang*) and the Pocong (a *mambang* in a white burial shroud tied over the head and under the feet) that both originate from such gruesome and tragic deaths. Their transformation into vengeful spirits reflects the blurring of boundaries between good and evil, where suffering and injustice are ritualised into spiritual potency. It is within this liminality that *bomohs* (shamans) perform summoning rituals to invoke the vengeful spirits of the dead by harnessing their unresolved pain and anger for darker purposes (Yahya 82). This suggests that the malevolent forces in the Malay cosmos are not entirely autonomous entities but manifestations of human and cosmic transgressions, materialising when the natural order is violated.

The *Kangkuksa Pelesit* myth from Kedah Siam encapsulates this phenomenon, illustrating how desecration, silence, and suppression transform a spirit into a force of

destruction. The Pelesit, a malevolent spirit commonly associated with shape-shifting abilities, takes the form of a *belalang kunyit*, the long yellowish-green grasshopper, distinguishable from its natural counterpart by its red eyes. In the *Kangkuksa Pelesit* myth, the creature is created through a shamanistic ritual that exploits the violent death of a young girl. The shaman, seeking to command supernatural forces, bites off the tongue of the murdered girl and recites incantations over it, thereby binding her spirit to the corporeal world in demonic servitude. The Pelesit then preys upon its targeted victims by taking the form of a lost girl to lure them into opening their doors. Once the victim engages, the entity transforms into its insect form and forcibly enters the mouth, triggering a frenzied possession that ultimately results in self-destruction. This act of invasion is not arbitrary; it signifies the violent imposition of malevolent forces upon the human body and psyche, mirroring the initial desecration that created the entity.

Within the ecocritical psyche framework, the Pelesit can be interpreted as a symbol layered with psychological and gender-cultural anxieties, signifying the intricate ways the supernatural intertwines with the collective consciousness of the Malay world. Its shape-shifting nature from the guise of an innocent girl to predatory spirit reflects the fluidity of identity and the fragility of moral boundaries. This transformation speaks to the Jungian concept of the shadow, where repressed aspects of the self or society are externalised as menacing forces (Rowland, *CG Jung in the Humanities* 90). The Pelesit serves as a manifestation of both individual and collective fears, particularly surrounding power, gender, and control.

The macabre act of severing the girl's tongue is especially significant, as it represents a violent silencing of the feminine voice. While the tale does not present the violation in explicitly sexual terms, the underlying theme of dominance and suppression aligns with

broader anxieties regarding the control of femininity and nature. Rowland's extension of the Jungian shadow theory provides a crucial lens for understanding this dynamic. In *Jung: A Feminist Revision*, Rowland posits that the feminine shadow is not merely an individual psychological construct but a broader cultural force that, when repressed, manifests in destructive ways (43). The girl's transformation into the Pelesit exemplifies this process: her silenced voice, rather than vanishing, returns as an uncontrollable, malevolent force. The *bomoh*'s desecration of her body not only inverts the natural order but also demonstrates the consequences of unchecked power over both the spiritual and material realms. The Pelesit's mode of possession—entering its victim through the mouth—further underscores this theme of forced control. The very means by which the girl was robbed of speech becomes the method through which chaos is inflicted upon others, reinforcing the cyclical nature of repression and vengeance. The demon's existence thus becomes a projection of repressed fears and anxieties surrounding femininity, innocence, and power, revealing the psychological and societal costs of silencing and subjugation.

Another crucial layer of the *Kangkuksa Pelesit* myth is the illustration of how malevolent forces do not exist in isolation but actively shape and are shaped by the natural environment. The transformation of lost souls into agents of curses and hexes does not merely manifest as spiritual disturbance but extends to the physical world. In the Malay cosmological framework, disruptions in moral and cosmic order also materialise in nature itself—crops wither, animals behave erratically, and landscapes become hostile. This is evident in an alternate version of the Kangkuksa Pelesit myth, *Pelsit*, where the victim's death by black magic is marked by an abrupt transformation in the village's entire paddy fields; the once-thriving rice plants suddenly dry out and wither prematurely, signifying the presence of the malevolent demon. This part of the Pelesit myth is crucial to understanding the vertical axis of

Malay cosmology. The disruption of spiritual equilibrium is not confined to the unseen realm but permeates the ecological sphere, demonstrating the fragility of cosmic balance.

At its core, the myths of the Pelesit serve as a cautionary narrative about the consequences of violating cosmic and moral boundaries. The invocation of demonic forces through black magic does not merely signify individual corruption but a broader rupture in the spiritual and natural order. In the Malay cosmological structure, the vertical axis—linking the human, spiritual, and divine realms—is fundamentally dependent on harmony and mutual respect. Transgressions against this order, particularly through acts of desecration, suppression, and unnatural manipulation, invite chaos that extends beyond the spiritual realm into the material world.

The tales underscores the dangers of silencing and repressing vital aspects of the self and the cosmos. An evil force, born from violent suppression, becomes an entity of destruction precisely because it is denied its rightful place in the natural cycle of life and death. Through this lens, ghosts and demonic figures in Malay cosmology are not merely a folkloric horror but a potent representation of the consequences of moral and spiritual transgression. They embody the forces of evil not as an external absolute but as a consequence of imbalance—one that disrupts not only human lives but the very fabric of the natural and supernatural worlds.

The Horizontal Axis: Rituals, Community, and Ecological Harmony

In the Malay cosmological framework, the horizontal axis represents the relational dimension of existence, where rituals, ecological responsibility, and cultural memory function as mechanisms for sustaining communal and environmental equilibrium. Unlike the vertical axis, which navigates the relationship between the human and the spiritual realms, the horizontal axis is anchored in lived practices—rituals that reaffirm ancestral bonds, ceremonies that

regulate the natural world, and traditions that safeguard the continuity of cultural identity. These rituals are not merely performative; they serve as acts of negotiation, ensuring that spiritual, ecological, and social forces remain in balance.

As established in earlier discussions of the vertical axis, myths such as *Batu Pong Ka Pong* and *Sang Buwaya* illustrate the centrality of ancestral spirits and the moral order in shaping the Malay worldview. However, these relationships do not exist in isolation; they are sustained and reinforced through ritual enactments that ground cosmological beliefs within daily life. The anxieties surrounding ancestral neglect in *Batu Pong Ka Pong* highlight the necessity of continual communal engagement to uphold these connections, while the *Sang Buwaya* myth underscores the importance of maintaining equilibrium at the threshold between life and death. These myths, deeply embedded in the Malay psyche, do not function as static narratives but as dynamic frameworks that guide ritualistic and ecological practices.

Thus, the horizontal axis serves as the material and communal enactment of cosmological principles, demonstrating how belief systems are integrated into lived realities. Rituals act as the bridge between myth and practice, ensuring that the harmony between humans, nature, and the unseen world remains intact. The following discussion explores key rituals that sustain this balance, examining their role in maintaining ecological stability, reinforcing social cohesion, and safeguarding the continuity of cultural identity.

i) Rituals of Land, Lineage, and Ecological Responsibility

One of the most tangible expressions of the horizontal axis is the ritualised preservation of land and lineage through *adat perpatih*, the matrilineal system of the Minangkabau. As previously discussed in the *Batu Pong Ka Pong* myth, the severance from the maternal buffalo symbolises a collective anxiety over the loss of ancestral connection and

ecological belonging. This fear is not merely metaphorical but is addressed through tangible communal practices. In *adat perpatih*, land inheritance is more than a social arrangement—it is a sacred duty that ensures ancestral ties remain unbroken. Women serve as custodians of the land, a role that reflects the enduring presence of Bundo Kanduang, the ancestral Earth Mother, within the community's spiritual and ecological consciousness.

Nordin Selat, in his study of the social system of *adat perpatih*, shows that this matrilineal inheritance is further reinforced through embodied rituals, such as the wearing of the Minangkabau headdress, shaped like buffalo horns, by the women, which signifies their direct lineage to the mythic buffalo and the spiritual duty of land stewardship (115). The importance of land as a maternal inheritance is also reflected in the *Turun Ka Bondang* (Heading to the Paddy Field) ceremony, drawn from the *Semangat Beras* (The Life Force of Rice) tale of Negeri Sembilan. In this ritual, women carry rice seeds to the paddy fields beneath a woven, cone-shaped covering (*talam*), balanced atop their heads. This act mirrors the cosmic order represented in the *Batu Pong Ka Pong* myth, where the buffalo carries the rock upon her horns, reinforcing the notion that balance and endurance sustain both the land and the community.

More than an agricultural practice, *Turun Ka Bondang* reaffirms the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Women's role in bearing the rice seeds symbolises their custodianship of cosmic abundance, transforming cultivation into an act of spiritual devotion. The *talam*, encasing the rice seeds, signifies not just protection but the harnessing of ancestral energy, ensuring that the land remains fertile for future generations. Within this worldview, agriculture is not simply economic labour but a sacred act that safeguards ecological harmony and preserves cultural identity.

ii) Rituals of Death and Communal Reconciliation

While the vertical axis reflects the soul's journey through realms, the horizontal axis emphasises the living community's responsibility in maintaining cosmic harmony across interconnected realms. The *Sang Buwaya* myth highlights the liminality of death, portraying it as not merely a personal transition but a shift that reverberates through the moral, spiritual, and ecological fabric of the community. The consequences of unresolved transgressions—whether between individuals or against nature—can manifest as disruptions in the natural world, necessitating collective rituals to restore balance.

One such ritual is the *Sebayuh* ceremony, an annual gathering dedicated to addressing moral and spiritual imbalances before they escalate into cosmic disorder. As documented in the *Kitab Adat Orang Mati*, an early 19th-century ethnographic manuscript housed in the National Library of Malaysia, the ceremony serves as a communal mechanism for restoring equilibrium between the living, the ancestral spirits, and the land. Here, the living acknowledge the lingering tensions and unresolved conflicts that could give rise to disharmony, ensuring that the forces represented by Sang Buwaya—death, retribution, and chaos—are appeased. The ritual serves as a preventative measure, reinforcing the notion that communal well-being depends on the continuous renewal of social and ecological harmony.

The *Sebayuh* ceremony unfolds at the *pangkal tanah*, a communal altar that symbolises the foundation of the land and its spiritual interconnection with the human and ancestral realms. Offerings of rice, fruit, and flowers are placed upon this sacred space, acknowledging the community's dependence on nature's bounty and ancestral guidance. The ritual begins with the *buka panggung* (opening invocation), during which village elders, acting as spiritual mediators, invite the ancestral spirits to partake in the *Lingkar Sebayuh* (Reconciliation Circle). Within this space, disputes—whether personal conflicts or transgressions against the land—are

publicly confessed and resolved. Guided by the elders, individuals offer apologies, receive forgiveness, and restore social cohesion.

Crucially, the *Sebayuh* ceremony is not limited to human concerns but extends to the land itself. The recognition that moral transgressions have ecological consequences is embedded within the ritual's structure. Wrongdoings against nature—such as overharvesting, deforestation, or neglecting sacred sites—are addressed through communal atonement, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between the human and natural worlds. The ritual concludes with the *tutup panggung* (closing of the ceremony), in which the ancestral spirits are thanked and invited to return to their realms, ensuring they do not linger among the living and disrupt daily existence.

In this way, the *Sebayuh* ritual encapsulates the function of the horizontal axis: it binds the community together through shared responsibility, reinforces the ecological and ancestral ties essential to Malay cosmology, and ensures that harmony is actively maintained rather than passively assumed. Through these ritual enactments, the anxieties surrounding loss, separation, and imbalance—so vividly depicted in Batu Pong Ka Pong and Sang Buwaya—are continuously addressed, demonstrating that myths are not static narratives but active cultural frameworks that shape and sustain the rhythms of communal life.

iii) The Horizontal Axis as a Living Tradition

The horizontal axis within the Malay cosmological system does not merely preserve cultural traditions but actively negotiates the tensions between continuity and change. While the vertical axis affirms the enduring presence of ancestral and cosmic forces, the horizontal axis demands their continual rearticulation through communal enactments. Ritualistic practices as seen through the *Turun Ka Bondang* and *Sebayuh* ceremonies are not static performances of

inherited wisdom; they are dynamic interventions that address shifting moral, ecological, and social landscapes. The Minangkabau matrilineal system, for instance, is not only a mechanism of lineage preservation but also a means of resisting external disruptions—whether colonial reconfigurations of land ownership or modern economic shifts that challenge traditional inheritance. Likewise, reconciliation ceremonies like *Sebayuh* function not only to restore balance but to make visible the vulnerabilities of communal harmony, underscoring the precarious nature of order within the Malay cosmological framework. In this sense, the horizontal axis is not a passive structure of cultural endurance but a contested space where myths, rituals, and ecological practices are continuously reconfigured to meet the demands of an evolving world. They are a part of the active process of renewal within a cultural system, affirming that harmony is not a fixed state but an ongoing responsibility.

Conclusion: Animism as a Model for Psychological and Ecological Wholeness

Malay animism functions as a unified system in which psyche, culture, and environment are mutually constituted, bridging the metaphysical and the material, the unseen and the lived. The vertical and horizontal axes, rather than operating as separate dimensions, are deeply entangled, forming a cosmological framework in which the spiritual and material worlds are mutually sustaining. This interconnectivity challenges the modern tendency to compartmentalise existence—between the human and nonhuman, the visible and invisible, the sacred and the mundane. Instead, Malay animism envisions reality as an ensouled cosmos where all elements are in constant dialogue, and balance is upheld through reciprocal engagement rather than rigid separation.

This framework underscores a form of ecological and psychological embeddedness, wherein human consciousness is not detached from the world but shaped by its entanglement

with land, ancestry, and the unseen. The vertical axis reveals the permeability of realms, while the horizontal axis demonstrates how this understanding is enacted within communal life. Together, they illuminate animism as an active, meaning-making system, in which myth and ritual function as mechanisms of negotiation—ensuring that spiritual, social, and ecological equilibrium is continuously renewed. This dynamic integration resists the Western paradigm that views animism as primitive or obsolete, positioning it instead as an epistemological model that foregrounds relationality, responsibility, and interconnectedness.

By reimagining Malay animism through the ecocritical psyche, this study illuminates its potential as a model for restoring lost connections between self, land, and the unseen. At a time when modernity has accelerated ecological destruction and psychological alienation, this integrated cosmology offers an alternative paradigm—one that does not position humanity as separate from its surroundings but as part of a continuous flow of being. Meaning is not an abstract concept but an ongoing negotiation with the cosmos, ensuring that the psyche, like the environment, remains in balance. In this way, Malay animism offers a vision of wholeness—one that recognises the interdependence of all things and insists on relationality as the foundation of existence.

List of Tales from the Malay World Analysed in this Paper

Title	Tale Origin	Source
Haup Malat	Sarawak, Malaysia	**Tinimungan Tangon: Himpunan Cerita (1952)** A collection of stories of the indigenous Bornean people, collected and retold by Minah Sintian and Rosliah Kitting.
	Kalimantan, Indonesia	**Ragam Cerita Rakyat Bahagian Selatan (1998)** A collection of stories in Bahasa Indonesia by Sutan Tinggibarani.
Burong Iri, Burong Ringgong	Kalimantan, Indonesia	**Tradisi Lisan dalam Cerita Rakyat (1995)** A collection of oral stories from Kalimantan, recorded and retold by Shafwan Abdul Hadi.
Batu Pong Ka Pong	Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia	**Bathu Png Ka Png** MSS 283, manuscript in National Library of Malaysia, copied by Abdul Rahman.
	Melaka, Malaysia	**Cerita-cerita Tangga Melayu Dahulu (1967)** A collection of stories of old Malay states in Bahasa Malaysia retold by cultural figure Zakaria Hitam.
Semangat Beras	Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia	**Ceritera Rakyat Malayu** MS 645, manuscript in National Library of Malaysia, copied by F. I. Rejab.

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