

## Creating Legends, Kindling Hope, and Surviving — Beyond

**Christina Yin**

*Swinburne University of Technology, Sarawak Campus, Malaysia*

### **Abstract**

This hybrid memoir-collage brings together myths and folklore from the Iban communities of Sarawak and their deep personal loss amid the pandemic that continues to shape and reshape the lives of humans around the world. It revolves around stories of death and life, reincarnation, and the mingling of the orang-utan and human populations that share life in the Bornean rainforest. Upon these layers of many truths, hope still kindles. It suggests that the world that is being rebuilt by this pandemic still has room for myths and folklore. Though surrounded by the invisible alien that threatens to invade our bodies, damaging and sometimes killing us, we survive by creating new legends that will help us live in this dystopian century. We survive on the hope that there is life still, beyond.

**Keywords:** Hybrid memoir, Iban myths and folklore, orang-utan, pandemic, dystopian, creative nonfiction

*Aki* Aban is walking in the forest. Perhaps he is walking back to the longhouse at Nanga Delok, or maybe he is walking deeper into the forest in search of edible ferns.

This is my friend Enggoh's story, which he heard from an Iban village elder at Nanga Delok in the Batang Ai river system in rural Sarawak. Enggoh has worked in Sarawak's National Parks and Wildlife Office for almost all his adult life, nearly forty years. He has many stories to tell, but this one is about people and orang-utans, and life after death. One could say it is about living and dying as a human and then rising again as an orang-utan. Not so different, perhaps from other tales or beliefs of reincarnation or resurrection? Perhaps.

Today, when we are surrounded by an invisible virus that appears to be ready to pounce on both the unsuspecting and the most careful and vigilant, perhaps this is the story to tell. It seems to me that throughout the ages, people have told stories and created myths and legends to explain their worst fears and greatest hopes. We cannot escape death, so we embrace the folklore or myths and legends our ancestors created or embraced so that when it is our time to meet death, we will be able to receive it calmly, even peacefully. Perhaps.

So, at Nanga Delok, it is just another ordinary day for the old man, *Aki Aban*, Grandfather Aban. But then he looks up from the forest path, and suddenly, silently and apparently out of nowhere, a man appears on the forest path in front of him. He is a stranger, but *Aki Aban* feels no fear. They exchange polite greetings and before he knows it, they are talking like old friends.

The young folk may think that there is nothing much to talk about when you live at a longhouse at Nanga Delok, far from the big cities, or even hours on road and upriver from the nearest town at Lubok Antu, but there are many things to talk about. The paddy fields, the vegetable crops, the fruiting durian, whether the bearded pigs have moved on, whether the fish are plentiful or if the tourists are coming yet and if there will be many, needing guides, boatmen, cooks and general workers who will carry the food and water on the trails and who will pitch the tents and start the fires.

As the heat of the afternoon fades and twilight emerges, the men must part, but before he leaves, the stranger offers his *parang* to *Aki Aban*. “Let us exchange our *parangs* as a token of our friendship,” he says.

*Aki Aban* does not hesitate. “Very well,” he says and offers his own *parang* to the stranger in turn.

I do not know the name of the stranger. This story must have been told many times through the generations by the time Enggoh hears the tale. The name of the stranger may be lost, but the *parang* is not. “It is in my longhouse,” the old villager tells Enggoh.

Although Enggoh did not see it with his own eyes, he believes the old man. Why would he lie?

What he does know is the story and this, he tells me. Enggoh continues.

“We are brothers, now,” the stranger says to *Aki Aban*. “Although I look like a man, I am an orang-utan, and we are brothers. So, you must never kill an orang-utan because we are brothers and sisters. Tell your people this and keep this *parang* to remember your promise.”

*Aki Aban* goes home to the longhouse and puts away the *parang* safely. He tells his relatives the story. From that day, no one in the longhouses around the Batang Ai river system hunts the orang-utan.

Many years later, when he is dying, *Aki Aban* has a final request. “Do not bury me, but place me at a special place on Bukit Seligi.”

His family obeys him and when they do place him at Bukit Seligi, at that special place he described, *Aki Aban*’s body disappears.

Enggoh tells the story this way, repeating and stretching out the word as if to show the body fading away and then disappearing somewhere far off: “His body is gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.”

A moment later, *Aki Aban*’s family members hear the call of an orang-utan in the distance. From this, Enggoh tells me, the longhouse people believe the orang-utans are their grandfathers. It is a story that the older generations know, but which the younger generations may not have heard.

I ask Enggoh if the people believe this story still, that the orang-utans are their ancestors.

“I do not know,” Enggoh replies. “Many of the younger Iban and even the elders have converted to Christianity. I don’t know if they still believe. But I know that the Iban at Nanga Delok and at the longhouses in the Batang Ai area do not hunt orang-utans.”

Similar stories of ancestors being reincarnated as orang-utans are told by Iban elders in other longhouses along the Batang Ai river system. Researcher Jenny Ngiem Machau listened to Kanyan anak Jayum from Rumah Jaong at Lubok Pantu tell the story of his own grandfather, *Aki Ajang*, being reincarnated as an orang-utan. *Tuai Rumah* Burau anak Buba told the story of a brave warrior at Batang Engkari being reincarnated as an orang-utan back in the old days of the White Rajah’s reign. His body had been laid to rest at Bukit Seligi and that night, he came to his brother *Aki Lampung* in a dream. He explained that he had been reincarnated as an orang-utan and that their family and their descendants must never again hunt or eat any orang-utans.

At Rumah Liam at Rantau Kemayan Manis, the story goes back eight generations. The storyteller, Labang anak Buja, recounts the tale without names as they have been lost over time. In this story, Labang’s ancestor died as a human and was laid out on the *ruai* (verandah) of the longhouse. But as they mourned his loss, all the relatives at the *ruai* witnessed his transformation and the departed ancestor rose as an orang-utan and walked out of the longhouse. All these tales end with the warning that it is now taboo to hunt, kill or eat orang-utans for the orang-utans are the longhouse folks’ ancestors.

This tale, repeated in various ways in different longhouse communities has contributed greatly to the conservation of orang-utans in Sarawak’s wildlands in the Batang Ai landscape. The survival of the iconic red ape has become entwined with the lives of the local communities. Is this where we come from or where we will go? The elusive answers are what we are all ultimately seeking.

I came to this understanding only recently.

We are creators of stories. Every day, I believe, we tell ourselves stories to help us make it through the day. Especially in dark times like these in which we live now, trapped in our homes, mask-bound when we move beyond the boundaries of our safety nets. I do tell myself that what I do matters, for my family, for friends, for my students. It is how I can make it through these pandemic days. They call this the New Normal. It is February 2022 and more than 3 million people have died from COVID-19. Governments are asking their citizens to return to the workplace, universities and schools, the businesses, shopping centres, the markets, life as we knew it but now, it's called the New Normal. They believe that humanity can only survive with the virus being endemic. We are the generations who will trial this test. My colleagues say that one day, we will catch COVID-19 like we catch the common cold or flu. Ah, yes. Perhaps this is true, but today, people are still dying from COVID-19.

At the beginning of the pandemic, although my thesis is nearly complete, I am not thinking about orang-utans and their keepers or the researchers of those in the wild. It is March 2020 and we are too busy stocking up on food, disinfectants, supplies. We are trying to make sure that Katie in Glasgow and Emily in Iowa City are safe. Every day, we have hours-long video calls at odd times. We track the news in the UK and the US where our girls live. The Prime Minister announces the Movement Control Order on March 18<sup>th</sup> and we are locked down; my husband Melvin and I in Kuching and my parents in Petaling Jaya across the South China Sea on the Malaysian Peninsula. My brother and his wife live in Selangor, too, but Melvin's parents live in Kuching with his younger sister. His older brother and his wife also live in Kuching but another sister lives with her family in Adelaide. We are dispersed across the globe but so is the virus.

We see that the COVID-19 virus is rapidly spreading around the world, killing its hosts relentlessly and mercilessly, and we are trying to discern the truth from the misinformation, the science from the fairy tales, the reality from the politics and public relations. International news, local news, social media and personal communication with loved ones near and far create an information overload that pushes me into a tiny corner. But I am forced out of this corner when I am able to fathom what is happening to my father. For the past year, he has not been feeling well. He has lost his appetite but doctors have not been able to diagnose what is causing this nor his discomfort. He continues to eat less and less. Christmas 2019 and Chinese New Year 2020 were a semblance of what we had celebrated before. Now, he is sleeping downstairs in what had been the maid's room because he cannot climb the stairs to the bedroom he shares

with my mother. It is a success if my mother can get him to walk a few steps to the dining table and eat a mouthful of food.

I need to get myself onto a plane to get out of Kuching and over the South China Sea to Petaling Jaya. Finally, the government allows interstate travel, and Melvin and I take the first possible flight over. Armed with disinfectant and wet wipes, we wear long-sleeved shirts and pants, face masks and screens and board the flight. Our elder daughter Katie has already arrived in Malaysia after a nerve-wracking journey from Glasgow to Heathrow to Kuala Lumpur, enduring 14 days in quarantine and a week more at a friend's house in Klang to avoid accidentally infecting her grandparents. (When told of this, my father asked: *You mean, I can't pick her up and bring her home?* He was upset and couldn't understand this. He had been so looking forward to seeing her; his grandchildren were his joy.) When my mother's messages become more desperate, Katie heads to her grandparents' house in Damansara Jaya but my father shouts at her not to come into the house, to leave! Poor Katie. She must have been devastated. We tell her to go back and try again. This time, she is allowed in and she is a Godsend.

Melvin and I arrive at my parents' house on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

In this next month, we juggle the pandemic, work online, try to keep Emily on an even keel out in middle America where people are protesting the use of masks amid visits with my father to the hospital, meeting doctors, getting no straight answers until they finally decide that he is suffering from lymphoma. Melvin returns to Kuching, my father is admitted to the hospital and is given a room on the oncology ward. He shares the room with two other men and we realise this is a room for critical patients because the nurse's station is right outside the door. My father undergoes tests, tooth extractions to prepare for chemotherapy, is on a drip because he is not eating, has a low dose of chemotherapy but that is all. He is too weak to sustain anything else. We are to try to get him to eat more so that he can undergo chemotherapy.

The doctors tell us he has two years. Later, I realise that they are quoting statistics about people with my father's condition. They are not telling us about my father specifically. When I ask on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being excellent, where my father lies, a specialist tells me 5 or 6. I cannot believe this when my father does not want to eat or drink, cannot stand or walk; is completely confined to the bed by a body that has betrayed him. He is hallucinating because of the drugs and tells us wild stories about contract killers and secret service agents in the hospital bed next to him.

Then, the doctors tell us they are discharging my father. We must help him eat and get his strength up so that he can get the treatment he needs. We are stunned by this, but make arrangements for a live-in caregiver; she will start on Monday, so we need to employ a temporary one for the next few days. We have already converted a room downstairs, installed an air-conditioner, bought a wheelchair, a bed pan. The ambulance brings him home while I am teaching online upstairs in the study.

That night, I sit with my father. He growls at the temporary caregiver who has shaved not just his jaw but astoundingly, his whole head, “Leave me alone!”

I hold his swollen hands in mine. My father says to me, “Stay with me.” He is breathing in loud gasps. I find out later that this is agonal breathing. When he was at the house earlier in the day, my brother told us his father-in-law had experienced this too, but he had recovered. I believed my father, too, would recover.

I sit with my father until it is past midnight. I believe he will recover and so I go up to sleep. I need to have the energy to be able to deal with the next day. So, I set my alarm to wake early to sit with my father again. When I get up a few hours later, I go downstairs and the nurse tells me my father has not slept during those few hours. I tell her to go to sleep. I will sit with my father. And so, I do. I hold his hands in mine.

People start waking up and the day starts. We eat breakfast with my father’s rasping breaths behind the curtains. We deal with the laundry, my mother is cooking, my brother comes over with lunch. We are busy. Then I settle down with my laptop at the dining table. Katie is studying upstairs, my brother is waiting for a phone call in the study, and my mother is taking a nap in the living room. The nurse asks me to come to see my father. He is quiet now and still. While we were busy, he had slipped away. I hadn’t stayed with him till the end. I was just a few feet away, but I was not with him.

The doctors had told us two years. My father passed away before 24 hours of coming home from the hospital had lapsed. There were things to do and I had believed I had more time. I will always remember and regret this.

Now, it is one and a half years since my father passed away. Many things have happened since then. Melvin is in a stable, fulfilling new job, I finished my thesis, Katie graduated and is now a practicing vet, I graduated and, after teaching online for six terms, am going to be back teaching in-person soon, Emily will be graduating in May. Yet it seems like just a moment ago when my father was in this house and he was eating with us, taking his daily evening walk

around the neighbourhood *padang*, watching golf, football, tennis, rugby on satellite TV, chatting with the girls over a video call.

The images of my father are clear in my mind; I see his hands that I am holding as he breathes out his last words, the socially distanced funeral, scattering his ashes in the sea off Port Klang.

In December 2021, I return to my parents' house in Petaling Jaya. My mother has been living here alone since I left in December 2020. Travel restrictions including a 14-day quarantine when returning to Sarawak have prevented me from visiting her. Mum turns 83 in January. She is determined and persistent: one-hour daily morning *Baguazhang* exercise, weekly online Mandarin lessons, crocheting amigurumi, cooking and delivering everything from sausage rolls and curry puffs to chicken pies and traditional Chinese vegetarian dishes to her brother and sisters living nearby. She has started a little rockery in front of the terrace house and is growing sweet potato leaves, mint and Chinese spinach in small troughs. Her neighbours tell her "You plant your vegetables outside your house, you will not get to eat them!" But Mum has only a small plot of land for gardening outside her intermediate terrace house. The earth had been covered up by my father when he had his last dog, Baron, a German Shepherd. Mum manages to stay strong, despite relatives and friends failing in these pandemic years. I hope that I can be as strong as she is if I reach her age.

Melvin is with us at Christmas and then joins us again at Chinese New Year and then for two short work-related trips. Otherwise, it is just Mum and me with visits from my brother and his wife, Mum's siblings and a few friends. Coming home to this house brings back a lot of memories of my father. Sometimes, little things remind me of how much he loved his grandchildren. He had gone into the second bathroom upstairs to make sure that everything was in good working order for Katie when she came home, so excited, so looking forward to having her home again. Back then, he had still wanted to make sure that everything was all set for his grandchildren. Then in that bathroom, bending over to fix a tap, he had been overcome with pain.

I wish that I had been kinder, more understanding, more communicative, but then I remember that he was not an easy person to talk to. He didn't like talking about personal matters or feelings. He was old-fashioned that way.

I know now that I have to create my own story. A story that will help me through each day in this dystopian world where we live now and for the foreseeable future. It is a story that will help me live with loss and the knowledge that life has plenty more loss to offer. When we

are young, we don't think about this. We think about our studies, starting a career, excelling in our work, earning enough to buy a car, a house, to enjoy holidays, raising our children, making sure they are equipped and can fend for themselves, and then people around us start falling ill.

So, like the Iban and so many others in the different cultures around the world, I create a story that helps me get through this earthly, human tangle.

This is my version of an *Aki Aban* story. I hope it comes true.

### **Waiting for You**

It is a lucky day when I decide to take the train instead.

My foot hovers over the gap as I grasp the railing and hoist myself up. All around me, others are doing the same. The girl with the pink hair manages to squeeze in through a window that has been left open. The old man with the walking frame is waved back. He doesn't even have a chance to try to get on.

"Move on in," the train conductor hollers in my ear as I stagger and use the pulley to clamber further into the carriage. No one seems to care about the social distancing restrictions; everyone is rushing on, some holding on by their fingertips, others suddenly deciding to jump off back onto the platform. For a moment, I think I hear someone sobbing and calling my name, but with a jolt, the train starts to move and as I glance over my shoulder, another passenger pushes my backpack and I stumble over the feet of the people seated on the plain benches lining the carriage. I grab a pole to steady myself and see that some of the passengers are stretched out on the benches, chests barely moving as they breathe audibly through their masks.

"Keep moving," the passenger behind me growls.

"Hey, quit pushing!" the kid with the baseball cap and skull-covered mask in front of me turns around to glare at me with beady eyes behind his goggles.

"I'm not pushing. I'm being pushed!"

The fitter ones keep clambering up and on. I keep going because I just don't want to stop with the others who are panting and breathing hard behind their soggy masks. It is rumoured that the higher you get, the less tainted the air. Besides, the faster the train hurtles up the tunnel, the easier it is to keep climbing.

Pausing to catch my breath behind the thick layers of mask, I look through the wide windows and think I catch a glimpse of a few familiar faces by the wayside. They smile and wave while strangers glance at me, then turn to keep scanning the others coming up from



behind. I wave back to the friendly faces, but keep moving on and up. My backpack is getting lighter though I don't stop to drop anything off as I keep climbing up from carriage to carriage while the train sways and swerves on. It is still hurtling on, even speeding up, and though the countryside flashes by, I can still see people, some with pets, getting on with their business, walking along or just waiting.

Now, as the crowds thin and I become used to the climb and the motion of the train, I notice more. Occasionally, the train slows to a stop and some passengers get off, a few jumping off excitedly, others disembarking slowly, as if a little nervous that they have reached their destination.

"How do they know when to get off?" I ask the kid with the buzz haircut climbing nimbly next to me. The kid shrugs.

"Dunno. Keep going if you can, ma'am," the kid says. She has rock climbing gear hanging from her belt and an oxygen tank, but she doesn't need any help as her sinewy arms pull her up past me and onwards. Even with her mask and face shield, she climbs effortlessly, almost eagerly.

"Sure, sure I can," I reply. I want to ask why, but somehow the why doesn't seem to matter anymore. It just feels right to keep moving on up. I feel the same eagerness as the rock climber and realise that over time, the noise of the train and the swaying over the tracks have disappeared. The engineers have done a great job with the train; I had thought that it was old and rickety when I first clambered on, but now, I realise that it's a marvel of ingenuity, apparently travelling with safety and precision despite the great speed and the old-fashioned colonial look of the *Keretapi Tanah Melayu* from our history books.

Youngsters keep overtaking me, but that also doesn't matter. My backpack is even lighter now, the slight pain in my right rotator cuff has disappeared, and the panic during the scramble at the start of the journey has faded while the scenes from the large windows on either side of the train have become clearer and sharper.

The sky is blue and the white clouds picture-perfectly fluffy when the train stops again, and the doors slide open.

"This stop, Tina's stop!" a cheerful voice calls. The harried train conductor at the start of the journey has been replaced by a friendly lady with purple rinsed hair who gestures for me to get off.

"You can pick up your Milo drink and snack over there and then head over to the *Kenyalang* Platform," the new train conductress tells me.

I go over to the café as I've been told, order hot Milo and *kaya* toast – it's on the house – and then stroll over to the *Kenyalang* Platform. From afar, the platform had shimmered in what seemed like tropical sunlight. Now, closer, I realise it isn't really a platform. It's more like a park, with neatly trimmed grass and shrubs, flowers and palms, and trees overhead casting shade with their broad branches and leaves. Beyond the park, I see what looks like a sandy beach with waves coming in gently to the shore. A pair of hornbills swoop over their namesake park and perch gracefully on the feeding station where fruit and seeds are scattered. It is a scene I remember clearly from childhood holidays at Pangkor Island with my parents and brother and I catch a whiff of sun block and salty sea water in the air. No one is wearing masks or shields anymore and there is not a single sign warning people to stay one metre apart. I take my masks off and stuff them into my backpack.

On a bench – there are no large red X's to mark social distancing – an old man sits, thoughtfully stirring his drink.

He looks up at me and smiles, "Sit over here, Tina," he says, patting the bench.

I sit down, take a sip of my drink, and smile, "I've missed you, Pa," I say.

"I've been here all this time, Tina. Waiting for you."

This, I realise, is true. All through my life, my father had been looking out for me, so it makes sense that even now, he still does. My father had been watching and waiting for me since the first months of the pandemic when lymphoma had taken over. Somehow, here, his terrifying struggle doesn't matter anymore. Neither does the relentless battle of making sure my children are safe in different parts of the world, working from home or going back to campus, trying to keep my job and office politics at bay as companies crumble, unable to cope with the changes inflicted by the pandemic, helping my husband deal with his own work instability, his parents' and my mother's health, the house, the car, the children's future and making sure they can be independent. All of that is in the past. They are all fine.

I smile as I share my slice of *kaya* toast with my father and pat the dogs at our feet: Alphonso, Sebastian, Cleo and Dougal, the Springer Spaniel. My father's final and favourite dog, Baron, comes trotting over to settle by the bench, pink tongue hanging out, happy in the shade next to Lucy, the little adopted mongrel. Even Krypto, Venus and Bruce, the Dobermanns we'd had when I had been a little girl in Ipoh, sprawled beside the bench.

What a journey it had been! Much like this final train ride, with twists and turns, climbing higher and higher, through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, marriage and children pre-pandemic, the utterly terrifying first wave of COVID-19 and MCO, and then the New

Normal, I knew it had been worth it. And now, after the last bite of *kaya* toast and sip of Milo, Pa gets up and stretches. I notice that he stretches luxuriously, no gingerly aching bones or unsteady legs.

“Let’s take the dogs for a walk,” Pa says in his warm voice that holds a hint of the hearty laugh everyone remembers.

“Which one?” I ask, brushing the toast crumbs off my favourite beach shorts.

“Whichever wants to come,” Pa says, and sure enough, only Lucy the adopted mongrel and Krypto, the dog who had always loved to explore, get up and trot after him. “Are you coming?”

“Yes! Wait for me, Pa!” I step over the dogs resting by the bench as dogs do on a hot, lazy afternoon.

So, as the sun starts to set, just as it had over that beautiful beach on Pangkor where my parents had taken me when I was a child with no cares other than when I could have another swim in the sea, I get up to walk the dogs with my father.