

Witnessing Ecological Distress

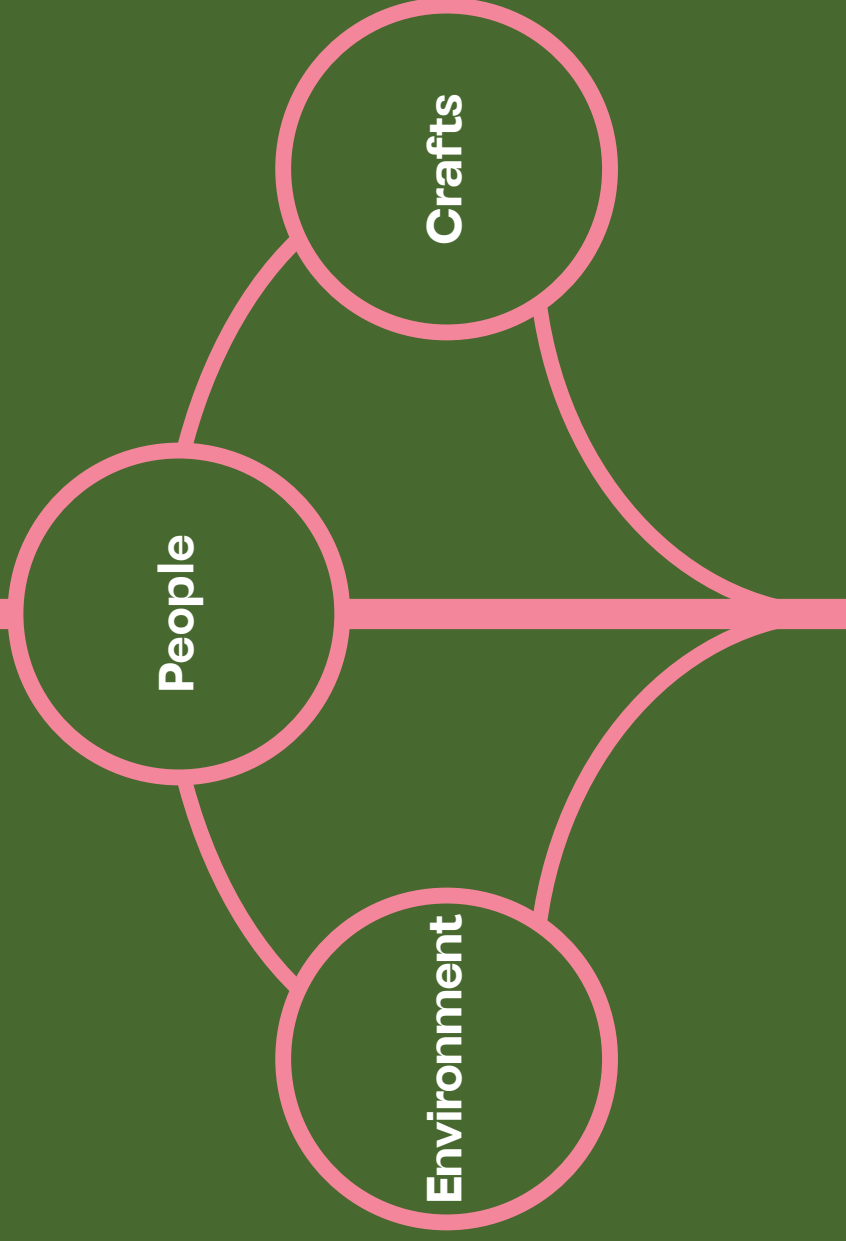
When the environment grieves, could we hear her?

Ecological distress is often described as an emotion, a feeling, or a response to ecological and/or climatic change. At its core, it is still a human grief. **How, then, can we listen to nature's feelings or the changes she has gone through or is going through?**

Using the approach of the interconnected 'entry points' outlined in our book, *Solastalgia: Forest, Crafts, and The People* (2021), we invite you to think about the ways you could bring forth stories told from the peoples' perspectives that also reveal the state of the environment. The environment and the people are constants in this approach, while the third entry point is open-ended.

Ultimately, these entry points foster a deeper understanding of a community's identity and how a healthy environment contributes to its stable roots. When these roots are disrupted, distress is expressed beyond emotions as objects, rituals, folklore, and more in an effort to maintain one's sense of self.

Entry Points



Evolution



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Then

Shoulder-length baskets were woven to store rice or cassava. In the past, wild pandanus thrived in the peat swamp environment, its leaves long enough to weave big baskets.

of Crafts



Now

Wild pandanus became locally extinct with the loss of the peat swamp forest. Domesticated pandanus, smaller in size, means smaller baskets are woven. Today, these baskets are primarily made for sale.

From community



The Mah Meri spirit sculptures / effigies were carved for ritualistic, healing, and spirit-appeasing purposes. This sculpture is placed at their spirit hut.

Then

to commodity

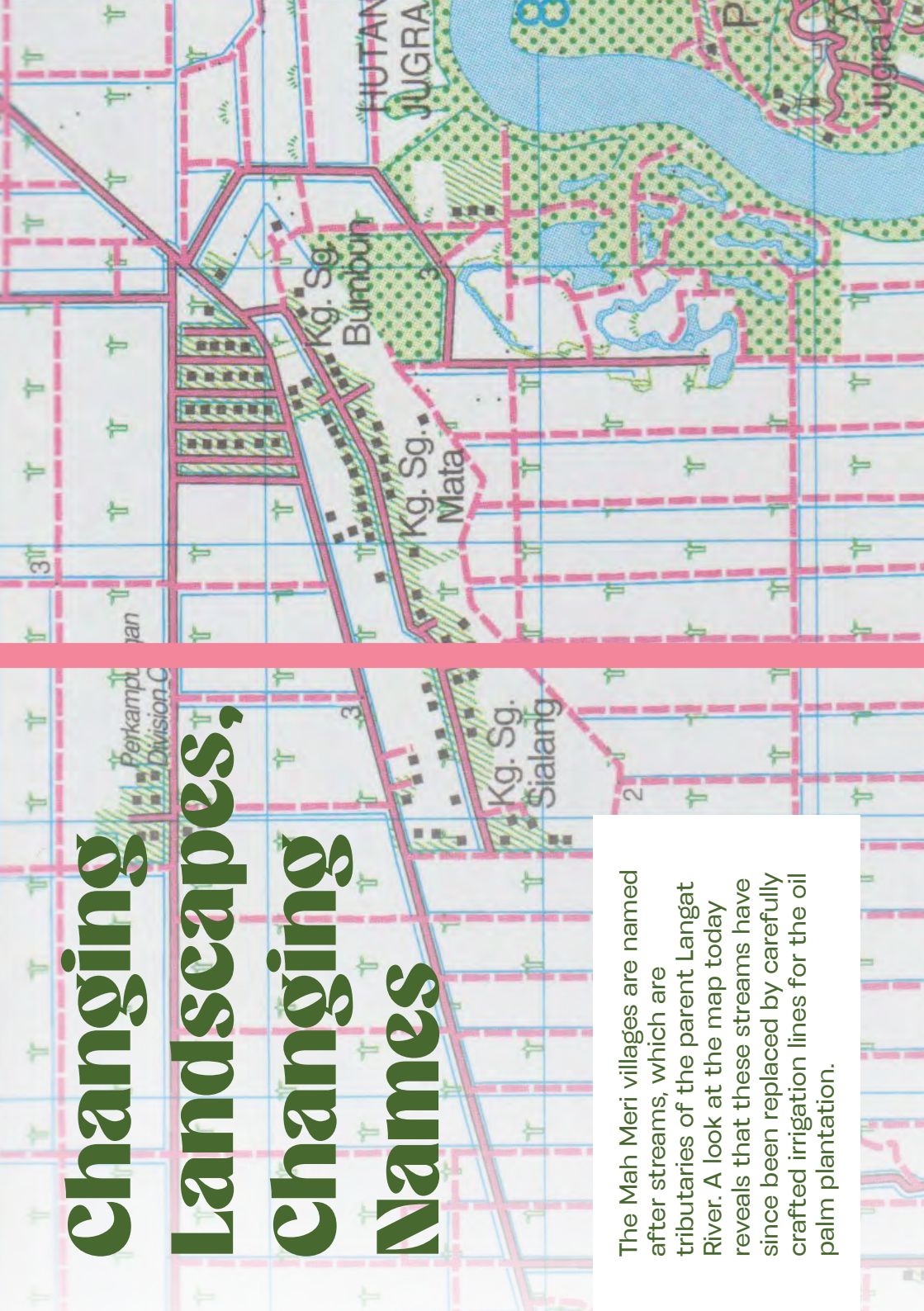


Sculptures are creatively refined, not only reflecting the individual skill and interpretation of the carver, but also to remain attractive to art collectors.

Now

Changing Landscapes, Changing Names

The Mah Meri villages are named after streams, which are tributaries of the parent Langat River. A look at the map today reveals that these streams have since been replaced by carefully crafted irrigation lines for the oil palm plantation.



Adapting Rituals

A month after Lunar New Year, the Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun will hold their annual *Ari Muyang* (Ancestor's Day). It is a day to remember, honour, and celebrate their ancestors—both spiritual and family members.



Sanggar (offering altar)



*Offering bowls
with bunga jering
(jering flower) decor,
sticky rice, and egg*

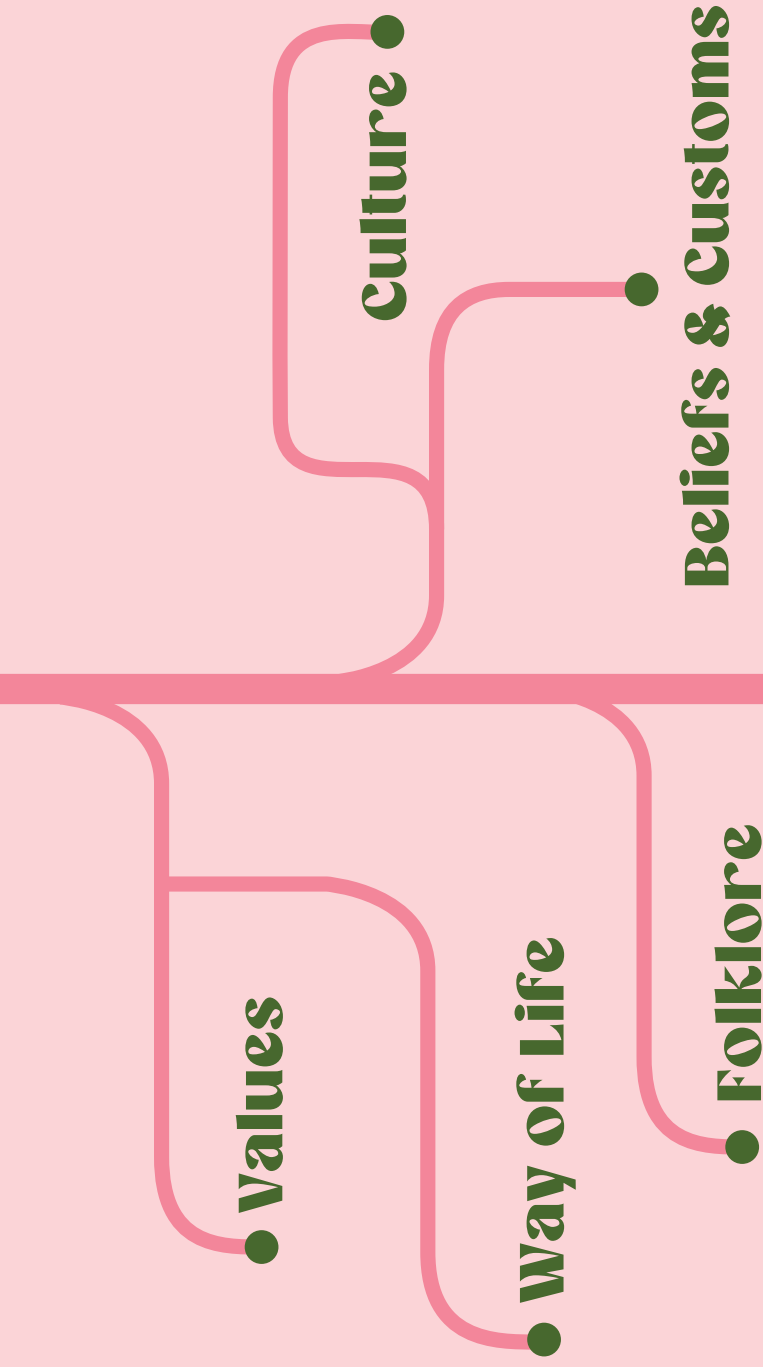
Stories from

the Past



A Semai folklore on the origin of rice tells how Bah Luid dreamed of the *jenang* (god or guardian) who blessed humans with the first rice seed. The soul of the rice is shaped like an egg, similar to the oval-shaped rock placed with the first harvest.





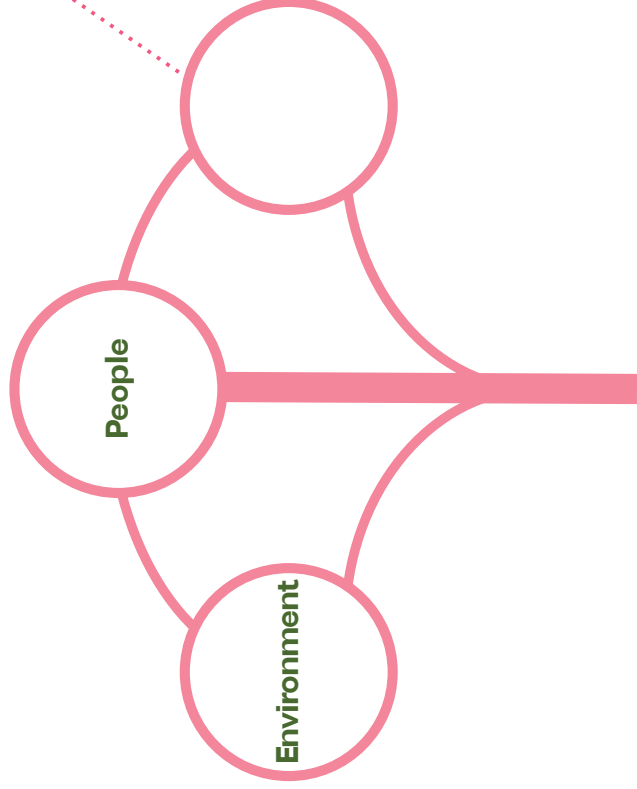
SENSE OF SELF

EXERCISE

Entry Points

We chose 'crafts' as the third interconnected point because crafts serve as utilitarian, aesthetic, and cultural expressions of a community, reflecting the lived environment and society at large.

Choose your third interconnected point.



- What other expressive items can reflect the community?
- What tangible objects can help tell the story of the environment?
- Think about an item in your everyday life that you can use to tell a story about yourself or your family.



Evolution of Crafts

The crafts correspond to available materials in the community's lived environment as well as to their way of life. As the Temuan people of Kuala Langat experience loss of their ancestral environment, from peat swamp forests to oil palm plantations, their way of life also shifted from subsistence economies of planting paddy and other food crops to producing commodities for the market and wage labour. Simultaneously, the material needed for basket-making also disappears with the forest, replaced with domesticated and commodified versions of the plant and basket respectively.

On the evolution of the chosen item/object:

- Based on the livelihood of the community, what utilitarian object has changed its role or use?
- How does the way of life affect everyday objects?



From Community to Commodity

Changes in material culture can reveal how a community adapts to an altered environment. The Mah Meri people witnessed their ancestral home transform from mangrove forests to vast oil palm plantations. In response, they shifted their primary means of livelihood from fishing to full-time weaving, carving, and performing. A carver recounted that in the days when the forests were dense, shamans and spirit effigies were essential. Today, the relevance of such carvings has diminished, with most carvings made to be sold. Nevertheless, it is still important for the carver to have a pure heart, mind, and respect for their ancestors when making these spirit carvings.

On examining changing material culture and values:

- How does a shifting material culture reflect the larger shifting economies?
- What does it mean or can be revealed when a material culture changes?

Changing Landscapes, Changing Names



When we asked an elderly Mah Meri what they called rivers and streams in their language, she replied that a river like Langat River is referred to as *dou gendek* (mother river) while streams like Bumbun River and Mata River are referred to as *alor* (small river). There are other words such as *lele* (end of the river), *ancuk* (end of the river before lele), *témbak* (downstream), *sindou* (upstream) as they were a fishing community and depended on the river systems for navigation in the past. Before we left, she said, **“There are no more *alor*, what’s left is the *dou gendek* Langat River.”**

On examining place-names in the local language:

- How does the environment and way of life influence the way a community speaks?
- Can a local language reveal the history of a place?



Adapting Rituals

Traditionally, the Mah Meri held the celebration at the end of the rice harvest. Since the 1980s, the Mah Meri last cultivated rice as their ancestral land was taken and turned into a golf course. Despite this, the Mah Meri demonstrated cultural resilience by adapting the timing of their *Ari Muyang* to follow the lunar calendar (as their traditional planting cycles also follow the lunar cycle). Now, the festival takes place a month after the Lunar New Year, as determined by the previous spirit hut guardian. **This adaptation ensures that the Mah Meri can continue their ancestral practices even in a changed environment and way of life.**

On examining changing rituals:

- Have traditional rituals been adapted to fit modern times?
- Is it cultural resistance, renaissance, or resilience that is the root of adaptation?



Stories from the Past

Ancestral stories, passed down through generations, play a crucial role in establishing relationships to each other, to the land, and to the more-than-human inhabitants of the landscape. Bah Luid, whom the Semai believe is their first ancestor, received the rice seed and was entrusted with its care. In accordance with this belief, every first harvest of the year involves setting aside a bag of dried paddy containing a *Lignosus rhinocerus* and a white oval-shaped rock. This practice, inspired by the folklore, ensures that the soul of the rice is nurtured. The Semai of Ulu Jelai hold steadfastly to this ancestral practice as it affirms a good harvest from year to year, and if abandoned (with the increasing threat of losing their ancestral land), they would lose all that they know.

On discovering stories from the past:

- Do mythological figures change according to landscapes and to time?
- What are the spirits of the land saying?

**Based on the given prompts,
how do your collected stories contribute to
the sense of self within a community?**

SENSE OF SELF