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Article

Water Oral History in Malaysia: Voices, Memory, and the Decolonisation of Water Narratives

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Abstract: This study introduces the concept of Water Oral History as a new approach to understanding Malaysia's water history through the voices and memories of local communities rather than technocratic records or official statistics. In the postcolonial context, the history of water in Malaysia has been dominated by administrative and developmental narratives that silence the lived experiences behind policies and dams. This article argues that an oral approach to water history opens a path toward the decolonisation of epistemology by rejecting bureaucratic discourse and restoring the voices of communities, Public Works Department workers, villagers, fishermen, and women who serve as both users and custodians of water. Through oral historical interviews, these micro-narratives reveal how experiences of drought, flood, and water disruption shape emotional politics and local identity, dimensions long neglected in mainstream historiography. Crucially, Water Oral History is not merely a documentation method but an intellectual act of reclaiming history as a site of social struggle. It reconsiders who holds the authority to write water history, the colonial engineers and state officers or the people who endured their decisions. Within postcolonial and subaltern frameworks, oral memory functions as a living archive preserving indigenous knowledge of river management, water rituals, and communal solidarity. By positioning people's voices as historical texts, Water Oral History reframes water as more than an economic resource, as a symbol of power, dependency, and resilience in post-1957 Malaysia. This concept expands water heritage studies and challenges conventional historiography by shifting authority from the archive to the oral.

Keywords: Water oral history; decolonisation; intangible heritage; water; postcolonial Malaysia

Introduction

The history of water in Malaysia, as in many postcolonial societies, has been shaped by an archive of control. Colonial engineers, imperial surveyors, and post-independence technocrats collectively produced an epistemology that defined water as a calculable, governable substance, stripped of its social and moral dimensions (Abdullah, 2025). This paper proposes Water Oral History as a counter-archive that confronts this legacy of epistemic injustice. In the sense articulated by Fricker (2007), epistemic injustice occurs when certain groups are denied credibility as knowers or witnesses. In Malaysia's hydrological past, rural communities, women, and indigenous populations were rendered epistemically invisible within the bureaucratic languages of progress and productivity (Abdullah, 2009). Water Oral History therefore operates

as both a method and a corrective, restoring authority to those whose voices were submerged beneath the rhetoric of modernisation.

To write water history through oral memory is to reimagine the very boundaries of what constitutes evidence (Jones & Russell, 2012). Environmental historians have long treated the landscape as archive, yet oral accounts provide a distinct texture of environmental memory that entwines human vulnerability with ecological consciousness (Crosby, 1995). In Malaysia, stories of drought, flood, and communal adaptation reveal an intimate moral economy of water, where scarcity is negotiated through reciprocity rather than extraction. These memories are not anecdotal residues but living epistemologies that challenge the instrumental rationality of colonial hydrology (Ishak, Mohamed Dali & Abdul Razak, 2014: Abdullah et al., 2022). As Holmes and Goodall (2017) have shown in the Australian context, oral narratives are vital in tracing how environments remember, resist, and recover. In Malaysia, they perform an analogous role, making visible the suppressed environmental knowledge of kampung communities and coastal societies whose lifeworlds have been reordered by dam construction and state-led irrigation projects (Aiken & Leigh, 2015).

Within the postcolonial condition, Water Oral History becomes a decolonising praxis that unsettles the hierarchical relationship between the written and the spoken, the institutional and the vernacular (Lacey, 1997). Following Chakrabarty (2000) call to provincialise Europe, this framework provincialises the technocratic archive by situating oral memory as a legitimate site of historical reasoning. It refuses the temporal arrogance of developmental narratives that portray water scarcity as a failure of management rather than as an outcome of historical dispossession. Through the act of listening, it reclaims historical authorship for those who have been categorised as beneficiaries, not agents, of development. The recollections of workers, fisherfolk, and women managing domestic water scarcity illuminate how water infrastructures mediate not only physical survival but also political subjectivity and emotional belonging. Ultimately, Water Oral History is an ethical as much as an intellectual intervention. It insists that history cannot remain the privilege of the archive, nor can heritage be divorced from the moral experience of those who inhabit its margins. In bringing oral testimony into the heart of water historiography, this study aims to construct a plural epistemology of the Malaysian waterscape, one attentive to silence, resistance, and the enduring flow of memory beneath the surface of state narratives.

Literature Review

The scholarship on water in Malaysia remains dominated by institutional, policy-oriented, and technical analyses that mirror the colonial legacy of hydrological governance. Examples of studies by Ujang et al. (2022) often frame water as a logistical or infrastructural problem, reducing it to a matter of supply efficiency, economic valuation, or environmental management. Such perspectives, while valuable, reflect what Worster (1992) describes as the "hydraulic paradigm" of modernity, in which human–water relations are mediated through control, regulation, and quantification. Within this paradigm, the social, cultural, and moral dimensions of water are rendered secondary, and the lived experiences of local communities are excluded from the epistemic frame of history.

A growing body of global scholarship has sought to challenge this technocratic hegemony. Historians such as White (2011), Tvedt (2004) and Bakker (2013) have interrogated the politics of water knowledge and the production of hydro-hegemony within postcolonial contexts. Yet in Malaysia, Abdullah (2005) observes that the historiography of water remains largely silent on the voices of those most affected by colonial and postcolonial water regimes. Even when cultural dimensions are acknowledged, they are often romanticised as heritage rather than examined as forms of epistemic resistance. This gap exposes an enduring epistemic injustice, wherein the oral traditions, collective memories, and everyday struggles of water users are not recognised as legitimate historical sources.

In response, scholars of environmental humanities and oral history have emphasised the necessity of integrating narrative, affect, and memory into ecological understanding. Holmes and Goodall (2017) for example, argue that environmental memory offers an archive of emotions, moralities, and local adaptations that cannot be captured through quantitative methods. Their insights resonate strongly within the Malaysian context, where rural and indigenous communities continue to experience water scarcity, flooding, and state

intervention as both ecological and political realities. However, despite the country's rich oral traditions, including river legends, village recollections, and the testimonies of Public Works Department labourers, these forms of knowledge have rarely been treated as epistemologically equal to written documentation.

The absence of oral perspectives in Malaysian water historiography also reflects a wider postcolonial condition. Chakrabarty (2000) provides a crucial entry point for understanding how Eurocentric assumptions continue to structure local scholarship. Archival material, largely produced under British technocratic rationality, has been naturalised as neutral evidence rather than recognised as a discourse of power. In contrast, Water Oral History reclaims the spoken, the emotional, and the experiential as legitimate sources of historical reasoning. It invites scholars to read the silences of the archive through the testimonies of those who lived with and through water, thereby reframing water not only as a natural or economic resource but also as a social and moral actor embedded in the postcolonial Malaysian experience.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in critical historiography and hermeneutic textual analysis. Rather than relying on field-based ethnography or interview data, it prioritises a systematic engagement with archival materials, library collections, and documentary sources as epistemological sites for uncovering the layered construction of Malaysia's water history. The choice of historiographical analysis is justified by the need to trace how narratives of water management and governance evolved through time, exposing the continuities and ruptures that shaped both colonial and postcolonial discourses. The approach treats the archive not as a neutral repository of facts but as a terrain of power in which colonial administrators and state technocrats produced, legitimised, and normalised particular ways of knowing water.

The research materials were collected from major repositories such as the National Archives of Malaysia, the National Library of Malaysia, and selected university libraries, complemented by peer-reviewed sources from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The hermeneutic method is employed to interpret these materials critically, focusing on how meaning is generated, concealed, or contested within textual representations of water. This interpretive process highlights silences, omissions, and contradictions in existing scholarship, thereby revealing the ideological foundations that underpin dominant hydrological narratives. Methodologically, the study is interpretive rather than descriptive, aiming to reposition textual evidence itself as a subject of critique. Through this critical reading of archives and texts, the research contributes to the historiography of water in Malaysia and advances the broader agenda of decolonising knowledge by demonstrating that reconstructing the hydrological past requires reflexive interpretation of its textual foundations.

The Findings

1. Reconstructing the Archive: Colonial Hydrology and the Politics of Documentation

The colonial archive in British Malaya was not a neutral repository of knowledge but an apparatus of power that actively constructed the meanings of water, nature, and governance (Abdullah, 2025). Within its engineering reports, administrative memoranda, and topographical surveys lay an epistemology of domination that translated rivers, rain, and human communities into measurable entities subject to state control (Abdullah, Mohd Noor & Mat Enh, 2023). To reconstruct this archive is not to recover its facts but to expose its politics, the ways in which it defined what counted as truth and who was authorised to speak about water. The British hydrological enterprise, framed within the discourse of "improvement," converted water into an object of quantification and surveillance, erasing the moral and cultural dimensions that once structured local relationships with rivers and rainfall (Beattie & Morgan, 2017).

The rhetoric of improvement, widely invoked in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial administration, functioned as both moral justification and administrative technology. Reports from the Federated Malay States, Public Works Department (PWD) routinely described the construction of dams, irrigation channels, and drainage schemes as acts of benevolent modernisation. In these documents, rivers were depicted as unruly forces to be disciplined, and Malay communities as passive beneficiaries of British

scientific rationality (Abdullah, 2009). Yet behind this paternalistic tone lay an imperial logic that equated governance with control and progress with intervention. The act of measuring water levels, classifying rainfall, and codifying supply systems represented a deeper transformation: the displacement of local ecological understanding by an imported technocratic rationality.

Colonial hydrology thus operated as a textual regime. Engineering blueprints and statistical tables were not mere technical artefacts but instruments of epistemic ordering that redefined how the landscape could be imagined (D'Souza, 2006). As scholars such as Edney (1997) and Cohn (2021) have argued, the colonial state's reliance on documentation was an exercise in epistemological conquest, a process that turned space into territory and knowledge into governance. In Malaya, this logic found expression in the bureaucratisation of water. The archive rendered rivers as infrastructural systems to be improved rather than as living entities embedded in local cosmologies. By documenting and categorising every stream, rainfall pattern, and irrigation line, the British administration naturalised its authority as the sole arbiter of hydrological knowledge (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2017).

What remains absent in these archives is as revealing as what is recorded. The voices of labourers who dug the channels, women who carried water, and farmers who endured drought are conspicuously missing. The colonial document, while voluminous, is structured by silence (Abdullah, 2025). These silences, as Trouillot (2015) reminds us, are not accidents but products of power that shape what can be remembered and what must be forgotten. The archive, in this sense, becomes a technology of amnesia, obscuring the experiential dimensions of water while elevating bureaucratic abstraction. The representation of rivers as data displaced the sensory and moral intimacy through which local communities related to their environment.

Reconstructing the colonial hydrological archive therefore requires a reading strategy that treats these documents as both historical artefacts and ideological texts. The aim is not to reject their empirical content but to destabilise their authority. By interrogating the language of precision, efficiency, and productivity, one uncovers the colonial imagination that transformed water into an emblem of imperial order. This critical reconstruction also demands attention to the margins of the archive, to marginalia, annotations, and discrepancies that reveal the tension between textual certainty and material unpredictability. Through such readings, the colonial archive emerges not as a source of objective truth but as a contested site where knowledge and power flow together, mirroring the rivers it sought to control (Mullenite, 2020). Ultimately, the politics of documentation in British Malaya illuminates how the act of writing water was inseparable from the project of ruling it. The colonial hydrological record did not merely describe reality; it produced it. To reconstruct this archive is to expose the epistemic foundations of domination and to prepare the ground for alternative ways of knowing, ways that recognise water not only as a measurable resource but as a bearer of memory, meaning, and moral relations (Moo & Fernando, 2018: Bipin, Babulal & Ariffin, 2019).

2. Silenced Voices and the Limits of Postcolonial Historiography

The postcolonial rewriting of Malaysia's water history has often been presented as a national narrative of progress, self-determination, and modern governance. Yet beneath the language of independence lies a persistent continuity of colonial epistemologies. The bureaucratic rationalities that once served the British Empire were not dismantled after 1957 but absorbed into the developmental machinery of the new nation-state (Abdullah, 2021). The technocratic management of water, framed as an emblem of modern nationhood, continued to operate through what Foucault (1991) termed "governmentality," an art of governance that shapes both populations and their environments. In Malaysia, this took the form of a "hydraulic governmentality" that extended colonial logics of control and measurement into the postcolonial order. The result is a historiography that celebrates infrastructure but remains largely silent about the people who lived within and beneath it (Abdullah et al., 2024).

The official histories produced by state agencies and engineering departments are dominated by narratives of achievement: the building of dams, the expansion of urban water supply, and the extension of irrigation systems for agriculture. These narratives position the state as the central actor and water as the passive medium of national progress. However, such representations reproduce the epistemic hierarchy of the colonial archive by privileging expertise, bureaucracy, and technological mastery over the everyday

experiences of users and workers. The Public Works Department (JKR), inherited directly from British administrative structures, became both a builder of modernity and a custodian of silence. Its reports enumerate cubic metres of water and kilometres of pipelines but omit the voices of those who laboured to construct them or who suffered displacement from their creation. The state, in adopting the bureaucratic archive as the foundation of historical knowledge, internalised the colonial distinction between those who govern and those who are governed (Abdullah, 2019: Ujang et al., 2022).

This silence is not merely an oversight; it constitutes what Fricker (2007) defines as epistemic injustice. The capacity to contribute to knowledge has been unevenly distributed, and the testimonies of subaltern groups have been systemically disqualified as non-knowledge. The oral accounts of women managing domestic water scarcity, the recollections of villagers enduring seasonal floods, and the memories of JKR field workers who maintained rural pipelines rarely enter the record. Their exclusion reflects not the absence of history but the boundaries of legitimacy set by postcolonial institutions that continue to inherit colonial epistemic frameworks. As Fricker argues, the denial of testimonial credibility is itself a form of injustice, perpetuating inequalities in who is allowed to be heard and remembered (Fricker, 2007).

Trouillot (2015) notion of archival silence further clarifies how power operates in the production of history. What is excluded from the record does not vanish but shapes the conditions of historical understanding. In Malaysia's case, the silences surrounding the social life of water reveal how the postcolonial state re-inscribed colonial hierarchies through the bureaucratisation of memory. Development reports, national plans, and engineering bulletins preserve the voice of authority while muting the experiential narratives that could destabilise the myth of linear progress (Chan, 2009; Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2020). These silences function as what Trouillot calls "formulas of erasure," through which uncomfortable memories are neutralised to maintain the coherence of state legitimacy (Trouillot, 2015).

A critical reading of postcolonial historiography must therefore confront its own complicity in sustaining these hierarchies (Chakrabarty, 2000). While independence promised epistemic liberation, the intellectual architecture of water history remained tethered to colonial logics of documentation and measurement (Morshed, 2024). The absence of subaltern voices in official water histories is symptomatic of a deeper failure to democratise historical production (Chakrabarty, 2000). To move beyond this impasse, historians must engage with the politics of listening. The reconstruction of Malaysia's hydrological past requires not only revisiting the archive but reimagining it as a contested field where power, silence, and testimony intersect. By recognising silence as both a product and a strategy of governance, this approach exposes the limits of postcolonial historiography and opens the possibility for a more inclusive, ethical, and dialogical understanding of water's place in the nation's memory.

3. Water Oral History as Counter-Archive and Method

To speak of Water Oral History is to reimagine the foundations of historiography itself. It emerges as a response to the epistemic enclosure of the written archive, which has long defined what counts as legitimate historical knowledge (Stoler, 2008). In Malaysia, where water has been bureaucratised through colonial and postcolonial regimes of documentation, the archive privileges the language of policy, engineering, and governance (Abdullah, 2019). The result is an epistemological void where lived experiences, emotions, and cultural meanings of water have been rendered inaudible (Abdullah, 2025). Water Oral History seeks to fill that void, not by supplementing the archive but by subverting its authority. It positions oral testimony, memory, and vernacular narrative as a counter-archive: an active and living repository of historical consciousness that refuses the hierarchical distinction between document and voice.

This approach draws intellectual strength from the subaltern critique advanced by Spivak (2023) and Chakrabarty (2000). Spivak's question, can the subaltern speak, is particularly resonant within the context of Malaysia's water history. The subaltern not only speaks but remembers, and in remembering, contests the silences imposed by both colonial bureaucracy and postcolonial technocracy. Chakrabarty's call to provincialise Europe provides a further imperative, urging historians to displace the universality of Western epistemes and to restore the vernacular as a site of historical reasoning. Water Oral History thus operates as

both a method and a critique. It challenges the hegemony of the written word and affirms the legitimacy of oral knowledge as a form of theoretical intervention.

In practice, Water Oral History privileges narrative over data, testimony over statistics, and affect over abstraction. It draws upon oral recollections of villagers, labourers, fishermen, and women who have negotiated the moral and physical economies of water in their daily lives. Their stories constitute what Holmes & Goodall (2017) describe as environmental memory, the intertwining of ecological change with human remembrance. Environmental memory is not merely recollection; it is an epistemic mode through which communities interpret, adapt to, and resist transformations in their surroundings. In Malaysia, such memories preserve a social ecology that official archives cannot capture: the rhythm of monsoon cycles, the ritual of drawing water from wells, and the sensory knowledge of river currents that guided agricultural and domestic life. These forms of memory represent a living archive that exists outside state institutions yet continually contests them (Abdullah, 2025).

The counter-archival function of Water Oral History lies in its capacity to expose what the bureaucratic archive cannot admit, the affective, moral, and communal dimensions of water (Hull, 2012). Whereas the colonial and postcolonial state sought to discipline water through quantification and control, oral narratives reveal its unpredictability and agency (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2019). They remind us that water is not only governed but also governs, shaping identities, livelihoods, and emotional geographies. Listening to these narratives is therefore an ethical act as much as a methodological one. It requires the historian to suspend the epistemic hierarchy that privileges written documentation and to recognise oral testimony as an autonomous mode of knowledge production. Crucially, Water Oral History also invites a rethinking of the archive itself. Rather than viewing it as a static collection of documents, this perspective conceives of the archive as a living, plural entity composed of voices, silences, and intergenerational transmissions. The oral, in this sense, does not merely supplement the written; it destabilises it by insisting that memory is not subordinate to text. By recovering these voices, Water Oral History performs a decolonial gesture. It returns authority to those whose knowledge has been historically dismissed as anecdotal or folkloric. The result is a historiography that is dialogical rather than hierarchical, one that recognises the coexistence of multiple epistemologies in understanding Malaysia's waterscape. Ultimately, Water Oral History transforms the study of water from a technocratic exercise into a moral and cultural inquiry. It challenges historians to read beyond the archive and to listen across silences, to acknowledge that knowledge flows not only through documents but through voices, gestures, and memories. As a counter-archive, it does not seek to erase the written record but to surround it, to remind scholarship that the life of water, like history itself, cannot be contained within the bounds of a file or a formula.

4. Reclaiming Indigenous and Local Water Knowledge

To reclaim indigenous and local water knowledge in Malaysia is to confront the intellectual consequences of colonial and postcolonial erasures. The epistemological frameworks that governed water during British rule privileged hydraulic engineering, scientific quantification, and economic rationality, effectively marginalising the cosmological and moral systems through which local communities understood and engaged with their environment (Code, 2006). Even after independence, this asymmetry persisted. Developmental narratives continued to present indigenous water practices as primitive or inefficient, suitable only as cultural heritage rather than as living epistemologies. Reclamation, therefore, must begin with an act of epistemic reversal: to recognise that local knowledge is not a residual tradition but a parallel system of reasoning that sustains ecological balance, social cohesion, and moral accountability (Twance, 2019).

Indigenous cosmologies across the Malay Peninsula articulate a deep ethical relationship between humans and water. In Malay culture, water is more than a physical element; it is a carrier of life, purity, and social harmony (Hussain et al., 2020). Rituals such as mandi safar or the ceremonial washing of royal regalia embody an understanding of water as both spiritual and communal (Singaravelu, 1986: Yousof, 2015). Among Orang Asli groups, rivers are conceived as sentient entities that demand respect and reciprocity, not domination. These beliefs are not merely symbolic but encode sophisticated ecological principles. Seasonal knowledge of tides, rainfall, and monsoon patterns informs agricultural and fishing practices that maintain the

resilience of local ecosystems (Amran & Jamin, 2021). What modern bureaucracies dismiss as superstition often constitutes a form of environmental intelligence grounded in long-term observation and intergenerational experience.

The persistence of these systems, despite state neglect, demonstrates what Escobar (2018) calls the "pluriverse" of knowledge, the coexistence of multiple epistemologies that challenge the universalist claims of Western science. In the Malaysian context, this pluralism is vital to understanding how communities negotiate water scarcity, flooding, and pollution beyond the scope of government regulation. Oral traditions, proverbs, and community rituals serve as informal institutions of water governance (Abdullah, 2025). For instance, collective rules on river usage and communal maintenance of wells reflect indigenous notions of stewardship that predate modern water law. Such practices embody an ethics of care and mutual dependence that stands in contrast to the extractive logics of state and corporate management (Palmer, 2015: Muis & Razif, 2025).

Reclaiming these epistemologies requires more than their documentation; it demands their re-theorisation within contemporary scholarship. By integrating indigenous perspectives into historical and environmental analysis, Water Oral History reframes water knowledge as relational rather than instrumental. This approach treats oral testimony not as anecdote but as theory in practice, a living articulation of what Spivak terms subaltern knowledge. When villagers recount stories of springs that never run dry or floods interpreted as ancestral warning, these are not simply myths but epistemic interventions that encode moral frameworks for coexistence with nature. The task of the historian is to translate these narratives without domesticating them, allowing their epistemic difference to challenge dominant paradigms of resource management.

Equally significant is the need to situate indigenous knowledge within the broader politics of recognition. The marginalisation of local epistemologies reflects what Santos (2014) describes as "epistemicide," the destruction of alternative knowledges through the expansion of modernity. In Malaysia, this has manifested in the displacement of traditional water practices by state-led schemes that valorise efficiency over ecology. Reclaiming these practices is thus an act of decolonial recovery, restoring intellectual sovereignty to communities whose relationship with water is founded on reciprocity rather than control (White, Murphy & Spence, 2012).

At its core, the reclamation of indigenous and local water knowledge redefines the parameters of Malaysian water history. It reveals that the true archive of water lies not in government files but in the memories, rituals, and moral vocabularies of its people. Recognising this multiplicity of epistemologies does not romanticise tradition but revitalises it as a source of theoretical insight and ecological resilience (Khor & Zalilah, 2008). Through Water Oral History, the historian becomes not only a reader of texts but a listener to worlds of knowledge that have flowed silently alongside official narratives.

5. Towards a Decolonial Epistemology of Water in Malaysia

To move towards a decolonial epistemology of water in Malaysia is to reframe the relationship between knowledge, power, and environment. The colonial project did not merely extract resources; it redefined how nature was known. British hydrological science imposed a framework of measurement and classification that divorced water from its social and moral contexts (Wagener et al., 2001). Post-independence governance, while nationalist in tone, inherited this epistemic architecture. It maintained a hierarchy in which written reports, legal instruments, and technical expertise were treated as the only credible forms of knowledge. A decolonial epistemology calls for the dismantling of this hierarchy by recognising that knowledge of water is not a singular construct but a constellation of lived experiences, oral memories, and cultural practices that coexist within Malaysia's plural waterscape (Ujang et al., 2022: Abdullah et al., 2024).

Decoloniality, as articulated by Mignolo (2009) and Quijano (2024), begins with epistemic disobedience, a refusal to think exclusively through the categories inherited from colonial modernity. In the context of water, this means challenging the ontology of water as an object of control and repositioning it as a relational being that mediates human, ecological, and spiritual connections (Yates, Harris & Wilson, 2017). The historian's task is therefore not only to document the past but to question how the very act of

documentation has structured what can be known. A decolonial epistemology seeks to provincialise the technocratic archive and elevate oral testimony, environmental memory, and indigenous ethics as equally valid epistemic sources. By doing so, it restores dignity to those whose experiences have been historically discounted and invites new ways of imagining the politics of water beyond the state.

The postcolonial state's insistence on development as the marker of progress has perpetuated a hydro-political order that privileges infrastructure over justice (Abdullah et al., 2024). Water policy in Malaysia has often been framed through economic growth, urban expansion, and national modernisation, leaving little space for communal governance or ecological wisdom. A decolonial approach exposes this continuity as a form of epistemic dependency that reproduces the colonial logic of improvement. It asks whose knowledge underpins water governance, whose voices are legitimised in policymaking, and whose memories are erased in the process (Saimy & Yusof, 2013). In addressing these questions, Water Oral History becomes both a methodological and philosophical intervention. It calls for a plural epistemology in which scientific data coexist with oral testimonies, and where local cosmologies are not translated into administrative language but allowed to stand as autonomous forms of reasoning.

Such a framework also transforms the moral geography of water (Schmidt, 2019). When oral histories recount floods as acts of moral consequence or rivers as ancestral guardians, they express not superstition but a profound recognition of interdependence. Decolonial thinking invites us to read these narratives not as deviations from modernity but as critiques of its exclusions. They reveal an ethics of care that predates and exceeds the rationality of the state (Waitt & Nowroozipour, 2020). By embracing these epistemologies, scholars can construct a water history that honours vulnerability, reciprocity, and collective stewardship. The result is an understanding of water that is not confined to physical infrastructure but extends to the moral infrastructures that sustain community and belonging.

In the final analysis, a decolonial epistemology of water requires a transformation in scholarly practice. It demands that historians, policymakers, and researchers recognise their own positionality within systems of knowledge production. To decolonise is not simply to recover indigenous voices but to reconfigure the conditions under which knowledge is legitimised (Quintero-Weir, Mansilla-Quiñones & Moreira-Muñoz, 2023). Water Oral History embodies this shift. It transforms the archive from a monument of authority into a field of dialogue, where written and spoken histories converse rather than compete. By embracing multiplicity, the decolonial turn in Malaysian water studies redefines what it means to know, to govern, and to remember water. It restores to the nation's hydrological imagination the plurality of voices and moral ecologies that colonial modernity sought to erase, offering a foundation for a more inclusive and ethical future of water governance.

Conclusion

The attempt to reconstruct Malaysia's water history through Water Oral History reveals that the politics of water extends far beyond pipes, dams, and legislation. It resides within the epistemological frameworks that determine who is authorised to speak, what counts as knowledge, and how the environment is remembered. Colonial hydrology transformed water into a quantifiable object, detaching it from the moral and cosmological worlds in which it was once embedded. The postcolonial state, in inheriting these categories of governance, continued to treat water as a commodity of progress rather than as a living substance that sustains cultural meaning and social cohesion. This study has argued that such continuities reflect not only political dependency but also epistemic captivity. To break free from it requires a radical rethinking of how history is written, how archives are read, and how voices are heard.

Water Oral History stands as both critique and corrective. By treating oral memory, narrative, and emotion as legitimate forms of historical knowledge, it challenges the epistemic monopoly of the written archive. It insists that the recollections of villagers, labourers, and women who negotiate water scarcity and abundance are not peripheral anecdotes but theoretical interventions in their own right. Their testimonies disrupt the linear temporality of development and reintroduce a moral dimension to water governance that has long been suppressed. The act of listening becomes a decolonial gesture, one that restores agency to those historically reduced to data and restores dignity to water itself as a moral and ecological actor.

At the theoretical level, the study draws together the insights of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship to articulate a plural epistemology of water. Spivak's subaltern critique exposes the limits of historiography that continues to silence marginal voices. Chakrabarty's call to provincialise Europe reminds us that local epistemes must not be domesticated into the grammar of Western modernity. Head and Goodall's notion of environmental memory demonstrates how landscapes themselves remember, storing affective and ecological histories that transcend bureaucratic record-keeping. Together, these frameworks converge in Water Oral History, which transforms the archive from a monument of authority into a space of dialogue where multiple temporalities and knowledges coexist.

The implications of this approach extend beyond historical scholarship. A decolonial epistemology of water carries political and ethical significance for contemporary Malaysia. It invites policymakers to recognise that governance cannot be divorced from culture, and that sustainability is as much about justice as it is about efficiency. When local and indigenous epistemologies are marginalised, the nation loses not only heritage but also adaptive wisdom crucial to ecological resilience. Reclaiming these voices is therefore not an act of nostalgia but a strategy of survival. The moral economies of water, encoded in oral traditions, offer principles of reciprocity and restraint that are urgently needed in an era of environmental crisis.

Ultimately, Water Oral History proposes a new way of writing, hearing, and governing water. It calls for historians to read against the grain of the archive, to uncover the silences that structure it, and to amplify the voices that persist in the margins. It challenges the state and academia alike to practise epistemic humility, acknowledging that knowledge flows from many sources and in many forms. In recovering the moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of water, Malaysia can begin to decolonise not only its archives but its imagination of the environment itself. Such a reorientation would transform water from a symbol of control into a medium of connection, reminding us that history, like water, must remain fluid, inclusive, and alive.

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