

# The Lightness of a Handful of Rice and an Unresolved Search for Meaning

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**Picture 1.** Ine Aya' for Balaan Tumaan and World Opera Lab, Designed by IJzeren Gordijn.



Photo: Frisna Virginia by Rendy Mahardika (2021)

## Finding Ground

Kuching, February 2025—on my last day in the ‘On Reciprocity’ programme, Nursalim “Yadi” Anugerah and I sat down at Think and Tink to continue an unfinished conversation. Home to Borneo Laboratory, with its studios, workshops, gallery, library, and Indah Café, this space has been our nest for the past few days. Indah’s humble take on *nasi lemak* was no longer an unfamiliar taste. The screeching sound of a video piece from the ongoing exhibition on materials had become a daily melody. The giddy thrill of stepping into the book section remained just as strong with each visit.

**Picture 2.** Mai Huyền “Chi” (Vietnam) and “Joanne” Nathaniel (Malaysia) reading at the ‘Union of Publication’ corner, On Reciprocity Programme, Think & Tink, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia.



Photo: Jane Chang (2025)

Everything had settled into a rhythm of familiarity and groundedness, just as everyone in the group had started to bond—enough to exchange jokes, but also to voice disagreements. Even as we tried to focus on our conversation, I could hear our friends in the background, their voices rising excitedly as they worked through ideas—or, for all I know, debating—for their upcoming seminar on the politics of material. In another corner, silence filled the air as reading took place; each of us had selected a book to share with the group.

Leaving on only the fifth day of the workshop, I couldn't escape the feeling of incompleteness, not just in my time here, but also in our ongoing conversation on reciprocity. Things were just beginning to take shape, or perhaps, they never would. Not fully.

## Resisting Definition

Yadi had made the half-day bus journey from Pontianak to Kuching, eager to attend the seminars. Seated together at last night's food seminar, curated by Marian Chin, each dish revealed the shared flavours between the two sides of Borneo—the one we were in and the one he calls home. The border is political, yet seeing it as such demands constant practice. It's not just about looking beyond geography, but also beyond categorisation.

**Picture 3.** Preparation of the 'Plating the wild on a full moon night in Sarawak, Borneo' dinner curated by Marian Chin, On Reciprocity Programme, Think & Tink.



Photo: Jane Chang (2025)

This is precisely why Yadi's approach to collectivity, culture, and community—and the exchange of knowledge within and beyond them—feels so resonant to me. But perhaps this search for a definition can never be neatly concluded. It is contextual, evolving, and always in motion, much like the lingering sense I carried with me as I left Kuching behind. The search for the most balanced version of reciprocity will continue, as will, perhaps, the conversation with Yadi on his journey with Balaan Tumaan. This writing, too, remains open-ended; an ongoing attempt to trace and make sense of something that refuses to be pinned down. After all, to resist being defined is, in itself, a form of resilience.

**Picture 4.** Nursalim “Yadi” Anugerah and Ine Aya’ performers rehearsing in Amsterdam.



Photo: Jeffry Bakker (2021)

One thing we did conclude, however, is that the Bahasa Indonesia term commonly used as a direct translation to “reciprocity”, that is *timbang balik*, which initially served as the starting point of our discussion, did not fully capture the essence we were searching for. Sure, it defines reciprocity as an exchange that unfolds over time, unlike barter or transactions that require an immediate or simultaneous return. However, while we agreed with its temporal dimension, we couldn’t ignore the strong sense of expectation within it—especially in the word *balik*, which literally means “return.” It seems to suggest that a return of favour or gift is not just anticipated but required.

*The question is, can we open reciprocity to more uncertainty? In a society where relationships are often shaped by obligation and the expectation of return, can we ease our expectations of receiving and embrace a more open-ended exchange? Can we move beyond the norm?*

## Seeds of a Collective

Through his engagement with the Kayaan Mendalaam community in Kapuas Hulu, West Kalimantan, Indonesia, Yadi deepened his understanding of indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in relation to oral traditions and material culture. This awareness later informed his growing interest in *kadedek*—an endangered wind instrument made from natural materials—after encountering a literature finding on this traditional knowledge in 2007.<sup>1</sup> It wasn’t until 2012 when Pak Bunau, a Kebahan elder and expert on *kadedek*, unexpectedly held a workshop at Yadi’s university. Unlike the Kayaan, the Kebahan community still

1 This included Jaap Kunst and Kayaan archives

had figures like Pak Bunau actively preserving and passing down the mouth organ, like Kadedek, as musical knowledge. This condition became a turning point for Yadi.

**Picture 5.** Pak Bunau and Kakek Jakung playing *kadedek*.



Photo: Victor Fidelis, Balaan Tumaan (2021)

*If the transmission of kadedek depended on key custodians, what happens when they are gone? Can the younger generation hold agency to sustain traditional knowledge?*

These reflections drove Yadi to start Balaan Tumaan, a collective dedicated to reviving musical heritages, mainly *kadedek* and ensuring its survival among younger generations. This involves not only preserving it, but also modifying its design to adapt to contemporary usage. Combining this mainly bamboo-made instrument with an air compressor machine to control its humidity, and conceptually speaking, challenges the relationship between an instrument and its player. Many of its members come from the younger generation, curious not only to preserve their ancestors' heritage, but also to shape how it could be practised today. Their involvement is not a one-way process of receiving knowledge but an active engagement—learning, adapting, and finding new ways to integrate *kadedek* into contemporary music.

**Picture 6.** Nursalim “Yadi” Anugerah performing modified *kadedek* in Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt.



Photo: Wolfgang Günzel (2024)

Unlike some collectives that have become institutionalised over time, Balaan Tumaan remains sustainable through relationships built on reciprocity. There is a conscious approach to how knowledge is treated within the collective; it is not gatekept but circulated and shared beyond its members. This fluid exchange resists the rigid structures of formal institutions, where access to knowledge often requires a fixed commitment. Here, reciprocity manifests as trust, contribution, and shared responsibility, with weight and lightness that could only be felt through active participation.

**Picture 7.** Ine Aya' performance, Holland Festival, Muziekgebouw, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.



Photo: Nichon Glerum (2021)

## Opera, But Not as We Know It

At some point, our conversation drifted to *Opera Ine Aya*, a project Balaan Tumaan started in 2019—co-produced between Balaan Tumaan (Pontianak) and World Opera Lab (Amsterdam)—as a way of thinking through how an opera performance might take shape. Unlike the totalitarian model of opera known in the Western context—where everything is mapped out, from hierarchy to fixed scores—*Opera Ine Aya* was informed by experimentations and improvisations. It wasn't about simply presenting Kayaan traditions but embedding their ways of thinking in the creative process, and taking account of their indigenous concepts of storytelling. Rather than setting a pre-conceived framework, Yadi and his collaborators treated the work as an ongoing dialogue, never narrowed down to a single voice.

**Picture 8.** Rehearsal of *Ine Aya*, Mendalaam, Kapuas Hulu, West Kalimantan, Indonesia.



Photo: Reza Darwin (2022)

Rehearsals were more like experiments—small, intimate trials rather than steps toward a fixed final piece. Yadi described the process as intense and immersive, involving conversations beyond music itself, including on cultural ownership and environmental concern. Kayaan collaborators weren't just involved for the sake of representation; they were essential to how the work took shape. Ine Martha, a *dayung* (ritual leader), wove in poetic storytelling and land narratives, while Dominikus Uyub, a *sape* (traditional string instrument) master and key advocate for West Kalimantan's indigenous communities, brought in his deep connection between music and dance.

For the collaborators based in the Netherlands, their Thai, Filipino, and Indonesian lineage formed a quiet but powerful connection, one that tied them to the work and to each other. In this context, displacement became a shared reality, subtly driving the reciprocity at play. *Ine Aya* moves between interpretation and lived experience in such a subtle manner. The performance was held in Amsterdam in 2021 as part of the Holland Festival, and toured to three areas in Indonesia in 2022: Mendalaam, Pontianak, and Jakarta.

**Picture 9.** Ine Aya' performance, Mendalaam, West Kalimantan, Indonesia.



Photo: Hardiyanti (2021)

## Continuous Search for Balance

*Reciprocity is often seen as an organic process, but does it always flow freely? When there are no strict rules or clear exchanges, how do we acknowledge the imbalances that come with it?*

**Picture 10.** Nursalim Yadi Anugerah performing modified *kadedek*.



Photo: Banyu Susanto.

Yadi spoke about the ambiguity he faced when visiting Kebahan communities, where he was seen as someone who brings (material) resources. His presence carried assumptions. Meanwhile, younger Kebahan generations were resisting village authorities, trying to reclaim agency over decisions related to their land. Land, valued at just two million rupiah per hectare, remained a pressing issue of exploitation. When power is uneven—whether in how the community views Yadi, in the dynamic between elders and the younger generation, or between corporations and indigenous communities—reciprocity becomes difficult to sustain.

**Picture 11.** Landscape seen from Mendalaam, Kapuas Hulu, West Kalimantan, Indonesia.



Photo: Reza Darwin (2022)

However, our conversation came to rest on this: in both Kebahan and Kayaan agricultural traditions, rice was never simply a commodity. If someone needed rice, they could trade their skills, depending on their speciality and capacity. In this system, wealth was not measured by accumulation but by one's ability to sustain relationships. Interestingly, as Yadi recounted, the wealthiest individuals did not buy rice with money; they contributed meat, shelter, and resources, allowing others to take what they needed. Here, reciprocity functioned as a social glue, an ongoing negotiation of "contribution" and "need".

Although this dialogue remains unfinished, if there was one thing Yadi and I both agreed on for now, it's that reciprocity, in its most meaningful form, isn't about keeping things equal. It's about giving and receiving weightlessly, without the obligation or the need for something in return. Therefore, it may only exist in the quiet spaces of care, or as our friend "Wendy" Teo, founder of Borneo Lab, describes, a 'safe space'. One that is very often not given, but requires to be enabled.

**Picture 12.** 'Politics of Food & Seed' Seminar, On Reciprocity Programme, Think and Tink.



Photo: Jane Chang (2025)