Bridging Worlds: Exploring Manat and Human-Non-Human Connections in Gayo Community

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Abstract

This research explores the practice of *manat* in Gayo community of Aceh as a bridge of communication between humans, animals, plants, and spiritual beings, illustrating how such interactions foster a harmonious relationship with nature. Using storytelling method, this study shows how *manat* reflects a dynamic cosmology, where ethical behavior with non-human entities is maintained through equal relationships. The stories in this research are not merely symbolic but actively shape relational practices between humans and the environment, portraying a fluid understanding of existence where non-human entities are recognized for their agency and moral rights. This research also highlights the relevance of *manat* in addressing contemporary environmental challenges in the Gayo highlands, especially in the context of conflicts over natural resource management. It argues that preserving local practices such as *manat* provides valuable insights into sustainable forest management and offers an alternative to exploitative practices that threaten the ecosystem in Gayo region. More broadly, this study contributes to the discourse on human rights and the need to redefine human-non-human relationships. Well-being must be extended to include not only human life but also the well-being of all creatures within the ecosystem. By prioritizing coexistence and empathy, *manat* serves as a guide for sustainable development, challenging the anthropocentric models that often dominate contemporary sustainability discourses.

Keywords

manat, human-non-human relationships, sustainable forest management, indigenous knowledge, indigenous ethics

1 Introduction

The increasing loss of forests and the rapid expansion of human settlements have intensified encounters between humans and non-human beings, which prompt new ways of thinking about interspecies relationships. The initial intention of the modern era to separate Nature and Culture was not successful, and instead created ongoing entanglements between human and non-humans (Latour, 1993; Descola, 2013). Latour (1993) famously argued that *"We have never been modern,"* as humans have never truly severed their connection with their environment. Humans continue to negotiate between what is referred to as 'natural' and 'cultural,' which render the binary distinction between 'modern' and 'traditional' conceptually unstable (Latour, 1993). Today, contemporary anthropology has critically reexamined the relationship between humans and non-humans through different perspectives, including multispecies ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010), more-than-human ontologies (Tsing, 2015; Kohn, 2013), and indigenous environmental knowledge (Blaser, 2013). These perspectives emphasize the complexity of this relationship and how humans are deeply intertwined with non-human beings—whether animals, plants, landscapes, or spiritual entities—through food, labor, companionship, and spiritual significance (Embong et al., 2022; Haraway, 2003).

This study examines the Gayo practice of *manat,* a form of communication between humans, animals, plants, and spiritual beings. As a child born to Gayo parents, I grew up hearing stories about such encounters and the role of *manat* in mediating these relationships. Anthropologist John R. Bowen (1993), who conducted research on Gayo community in the late 1970s, defines *manat* as a 'request,' a verbal appeal made to a spiritual or sentient agent—such as a spirit, angel, or animate object like eggs or citrus fruits—with the intention of bringing about a desired effect (see Bowen, 1993, p.83). *Manat* resembles everyday speech that highlight conversational engagement with non-human entities but it carries persuasive force.

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While Bowen (1993) provides a useful definition of *manat,* his focus was largely on the discursive tensions between Islamic modernists and traditionalists regarding Gayo ritual practices. His work does not fully explore the existential, phenomenological, and relational dimensions of *manat* in everyday life, nor does it consider its broader implications for environmental ethics and indigenous epistemologies. This article fills this gap by analyzing how *manat* functions as a mode of communication that challenges conventional linguistic and ontological boundaries, allowing humans to interact with non-human entities as sentient beings with agency and moral standing.

To examine *manat,* I adopt storytelling as a methodology, drawing on stories from interviews and ethnographic engagement with Gayo community members, including *pengulu uten* (traditional forest handlers) and spiritual practitioners. Storytelling is not merely a mode of communication but a way of constructing and negotiating reality (Green, 2013, p. 5; Blaser, 2013, p. 22). Rather than reducing indigenous knowledge into predefined categories, this study takes stories seriously as forms of knowledge that structure relationships between humans and non-humans (Ingold, 2011; de la Cadena, 2015). Unlike approaches that distill knowledge into rigid classifications, storytelling acknowledges the fluid, relational nature of experience, which allows for a more holistic understanding of reality (Ingold, 2011).

This study also aligns with the discourse on More-Than-Human Rights (MOTH), which challenges anthropocentric legal and moral frameworks to recognize non-human agency (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024). Indigenous knowledge demonstrates that all beings—animals, plants, and spiritual entities—have rights and should be consulted. At the same time, ecological science continues to align with indigenous knowledge by revealing the deep interconnections and interdependencies between humans and non-humans (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024, pp. 25-26). By considering *manat* within these broader theoretical frameworks, this article highlights how indigenous epistemologies contribute to contemporary environmental and ethical debates.

By drawing on Gayo stories and ethnographic materials, this article argues that *manat* is not merely a symbolic practice but a creative act that fosters ethical coexistence between humans and non-humans. Through this discussion, I contribute to broader conversations in environmental ethics and more-than-human studies by showing how Gayo cosmology offers an alternative model for understanding interspecies relationships in an era of ecological crisis.

2 Methods

"To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a *method.*
And why not make a strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge?"
(Tsing, 2015, p. 37)

The data for this article consists of a collection of stories about *manat* gathered from several Gayo people, including traditional forest handlers *(pengulu uten)* and ordinary individuals. Due to time constraints and limited access to everyday ritual practices, much of the data was gathered through conversations where stories surfaced organically rather than through direct observation of *manat* practices. To supplement these narratives, I conducted semi-structured interviews with key participants.

Additionally, I have incorporated data from Gayo spells records collected by Sahali[1], one of my relatives. These materials were gathered with informed consent to ensure respect for the knowledge holders. Sahali, a Gayo academic with deep knowledge of local traditions, documented several mantras that were passed down to him by his parents and spiritual teachers. These records offer valuable insight into the spiritual and ecological connections embedded in Gayo practices. Discussions about these spells with Sahali and other knowledge holders also elicited further stories, which enrich the research with multiple perspectives.

In this research, I do not use a narrow definition of story. A story does not have to be a well-structured narrative. The understanding of story in contemporary anthropological research has shifted to include everyday storytelling, which can be co-created in conversation and can be messy (Falconi & Graber, 2019; Götsch & Palmberger, 2022; Maggio, 2014). While I did not initially seek stories, many surfaced naturally in conversations, which reflect how storytelling functions as an integral mode of knowledge transmission within the community. This methodological approach is informed by storytelling as a form of knowledge-making, which acknowledges the relational and dynamic nature of indigenous epistemologies. This also

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[1] All names in this article are pseudonyms.

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means that instead of categorizing stories as myth or belief, I take them seriously as modes of engaging with the world. As Green (2013) and Ingold (2011) suggest, stories do not merely reflect reality but actively shape it. Rather than treating storytelling as secondary to empirical observation, this study takes it as a primary means of accessing Gayo cosmology and human-non-human relationships.

The analysis follows a thematic approach—identifying recurring patterns in how *manat* is practiced. By comparing contemporary accounts with ethnographic records—particularly Bowen's (1993) earlier work—this study examines both continuities and transformations in Gayo knowledge systems. This allows for an understanding of *manat* not as a static tradition but as a dynamic practice embedded in broader social and ecological relationships.

3 The Gayo Highlands: Setting the Context

Gayo is an ethnonym that refers to one of the minority ethnic groups in the Aceh Province, Indonesia, with their homeland spanning three districts: Bener Meriah, Gayo Lues, and Central Aceh, all situated in the highlands of the Bukit Barisan Mountains (Schröter, 2010, p. 163). This region, often called the "land above the clouds" due to its elevation and scenic beauty, is famous for its Gayo Arabica coffee, regarded as one of the finest Arabica varieties. Lake Lut Tawar, located in Takengon, supports the Gayo people who engage in fishing *(bergule)*, and most also farm tobacco, cayenne pepper, chili, tomato (Mujiburrahmad et al., 2021) and various other vegetables and fruits. Tourism is also emerging as an important sector. The Gayo highlands are also synonymous with the Sumatran pine *(Pinus merkusii)*, considered Sumatra's indigenous tree. However, according to Whitten et al., (2001, p. 380), deforestation and forest fires have expanded the range of this fire-resistant pine compared to other broad-leaved trees. This has resulted in the formation of extensive pine forests, particularly in Central Aceh (Whitten et al., 2001, p. 380). Critically endangered wildlife such as the Sumatran tiger *(Panthera tigris sumatrae)* and Sumatran elephant *(Elephas maximus sumatranus)* also inhabit the Gayo forests. These two species frequently appear in Gayo people's mantras. Additionally, encounters between the Gayo community and monkeys such as the pig-tailed macaque *(Macaca nemestrina)*, long-tailed macaque *(Macaca fascicularis)*, and siamang gibbon *(Symphalangus syndactylus)* are also common.

In general, forest cover in Aceh has significantly declined over the past 30 years (Hanafiah, 2023). Approximately 690,000 hectares have been lost due to illegal logging, land conversion for agriculture, and mining (Hanafiah, 2023). Among the three districts with the highest deforestation rates—Central Aceh, North Aceh, and Gayo Lues—two are the homelands of Gayo people. In forest management and supervision, *pengulu uten* (traditional forest handlers) play an important role in Gayo society. Legally, they are also reinforced by Central Aceh District Qanun No. 10 of 2002 concerning Gayo Customary Law as an *adat* institution for forest management. However, according to Gayo et al. (2024), *pengulu uten* are not currently working in synergy with other forestry officers such as Forest Management Units (KPH) and forest police (POLHUT). This is because, historically, *pengulu uten* and other forestry officers have operated from different systems (Gayo et al., 2024). Formal forestry management led by government agencies does not align with *pengulu uten* practices, which are deeply rooted in Gayo knowledge. This lack of alignment creates challenges such as overlapping authority and differing approaches to forest protection and resource utilization (Gayo et al., 2024).

The tension between *pengulu uten* and the formal state system lies in their differing approaches to forest management. *Pengulu uten* rely on local knowledge, which reflects a holistic understanding of the ecosystem, emphasizing sustainability and communal responsibility. This will be clearly illustrated in this article. On the other hand, formal institutions operate within a legal framework that prioritizes regulations set by the state, often favoring agriculture and mining. According to Hariadi Kartodiharjo & Hira Jhamtani (2009), this approach remains the same as during the colonial era, where natural resources were continuously exploited while local communities did not benefit. Regions rich in natural resources in Indonesia often become impoverished, as the profits from resource extraction flow to companies, while local communities bear the greater costs (Kartodiharjo & Jhamtani, 2009, p. 6). Natural resources have been viewed solely as commodities for profit, without considering the important social and cultural relationships that communities have with them (Kartodiharjo & Jhamtani, 2009). They also revealed that since Soeharto era, with its centralized power, local traditions and community institutions have been systematically destroyed, and villages have become mere extensions of the central government (Kartodiharjo & Jhamtani, 2009, pp. 20–21).

This tension is also reflected in reports of Gayo community's ongoing resistance to mining activities in their region (see Hanafiah, 2021; Readers, 2023; Zulkarnaini, 2019). Gayo community's opposition,

particularly against PT Linge Mineral Resources (PT LMR), highlights their deep concerns about environmental degradation, which threatens their life space. Local residents and activists argue that the expansion of mining activities not only damages the forest ecosystem but also endangers Gayo Arabica coffee production, which is the economic center and way of life for them (Hanafiah, 2021; Lintas Gayo, 2024; WALHI, 2019). Additionally, PT LMR's operations overlap with protected areas such as the Leuser Ecosystem, home to endangered species, and significant cultural sites like the ancient Linge Kingdom (Hanafiah, 2021). Despite government claims about potential economic benefits, Gayo community remains unconvinced, with many pointing to the broader environmental and social damage caused by mining in other regions of Indonesia (Lintas Gayo, 2024).

4 Stories, Spells, and *Manat* in Gayo Relationships With Non-Human

4.1 Everything in the World has its own Story

In his rich ethnography, Bowen (1993) writes that the Gayo people explain their practices through historical narratives rooted in the Sufi Muslim tradition. His ethnography shows that practitioners framed their explanations within historical narratives—such as the creation of the cosmos, the origins of humanity, or the introduction of Islam to Aceh. While some accounts were brief and others more expansive, all shared the ground that *"God's initial creative acts"* continue to leave traces in spiritual and material existence (Bowen, 1993, p. 106). Thus, humans have the ability to build connections with and/or alter the spirit world and also transform their everyday world.

In his work on animal names among the Koyukon of Alaska, Ingold (2011) shows how these names are verbs and how storytelling is necessary to understand them. Animal names in Koyukon society indicate 'ways of living' (Ingold, 2011, p. 169) rooted in the animal's past, present and future lives. In Gayo society, similar concepts are also known: *'nama hakikat'* (essence's name). Bowen's (1993) ethnography does not touch on this in depth but in his discussions with both modernists and traditionalists, Bowen concludes that both agree that in order to exercise power through spells or prayers, one must interact with spirits through specific words—*"the right words"*—mental focus, and ritual actions (Bowen, 1993, p. 106). *"The right words"* can be the essence's name, which can be found in Gayo spells in the form of names of animals, plants, or even objects, which are not commonly used in everyday language. *Nama hakikat* is one form of Gayo people's friendship with their environment that is established as they know the stories of things, their *hakikat* (essence). Or, in Ingold's (2011) words: *"To know someone or something is to know their story"* (Ingold, 2011, p. 160).

In Gayo spells, the history of the object/animal/plant is often mentioned to justify why the individual casting the spells has the right to utilize a certain power (Bowen, 1993, p. 90). For example, the spell for *mungkur* (kaffir lime)—commonly used for healing—reminds *mungkur* of the reason for its descent to earth, which is to serve humanity:

Table 1 Citrus invocation for healing and protection

Gayo	English Translation
Hé limo si rëjë limo	Hey citrus, king of the citruses;
Aku tahu asalmu jadi	I know your origins
Nurollah nama nyawamu	"The Light of God" is your soul's name;
Nur Muhammad nama tubuhmu	"The Light of Muhammad" is your body's name;
Ruh batin sebenar-benar nyawamu	The inner *ruh* your true soul
Hé limo jëlënmu tulu perkara	Hey citrus, you have three paths:
kesa penyuci	the first, to cleanse;
keduë jahat	the second, wicked;

ketigë kin pemulih	the third, as a healer;
Rëje Rengkan menurun ko ari langit	King Rengkan brought you down from the sky;
Peteri Rengkan menuripën ko ari bumi	Princess Rengkan made you grow from the earth
Rëjë Rengkan	King Rengkan,
Peteri Rengkan	Princess Rengkan,
Tengku Jumal al-Hakim	Tengku Jumal al-Hakim,
malekat item	the black angel
Hartamu ni malëh kugunëi	Your legacy I will put to use
kin pemulang	as a returner;
kin memulangkan jiblis sétan	to send it back jin, devils, Satan
Karena ko segër turun orum wé	For you descended (to earth) at the same time as he [the patient]
dan tenironmu ngë sawah serlo ni	and your requests come due today
dan turah kugunëi	and I must put them to use

Source: Bowen, 1993, pp. 153-154

Bowen (1993) explains this spell in detail, on how the significance of *mungkur* fruit stems from the story of the fruit cleaning up the mess caused by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Bowen, 1993, p. 152). Within the spell, it is recounted that God bestowed upon *mungkur* three powers: cleansing, healing, and expelling *jinn* (spirits). Bowen (1993, p. 153) writes how a Gayo man used this spell to transfer the spirits into the *mungkur,* and the practice was successful because due to his understanding of the essence of the *mungkur* fruit; its essence name and story. Several other Gayo spells, which contain the essence name, were found in Sahali's records. One such spell is a bullet-proof spell called 'bullet nest' (*sarang bedil).* Sahali explained that this spell prevents a person from being hit by a bullet aimed at him. The bullet would deflect and be collected in a basin held by the spell caster:

Table 2 Bulletproof mantra (*Sarang Bedil;* Bullet Nest)

Gayo	English Translation
Asri namamu timah	'Asri' is your name, tin
Amran namamu tembege	'Amran' is your name, copper
Hak nurullah namamu besi	'The realm of God's light' is your name, iron
Bersifatlah engko besi kepede Allah	Be thou iron like Allah
ku Muhammad	like Muhammad
Baro sampe ko ku aku	Only then can you reach me

This spell mentions the essence names of tin, copper, and iron, the three elements that form a bullet. The chanter of the spell then challenges these three elements to embody the characteristics of Allah, who is Almighty, One, and incomparable. They are also challenged to be like Muhammad—noble, invulnerable, and unbeatable. Only if tin, copper, and iron can mimic these qualities can the bullet hit its target. The spell indirectly states the impossibility for tin, copper, and iron to possess the attributes of Allah and Muhammad.

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In this spell, the influence of Sufi teachings is evident, that the highest spiritual attainment for an individual is their union with God. Unlike the *mungkur* fruit spell, this bullet-proof spell does not mention in detail the stories of these three elements. In other spells, the narrative of an object is implied. For instance, in a brief mantra for treating toothache:

Table 3 Toothache healing invocation (*Kumen Ipon;* Tooth's *Kumen*)

Gayo	English Translation
He kadu, mate ko kadu	He *kadu*, die you *kadu*
Berkat doa Nabi Allah Ayyub	By the blessing of the prayer of the Prophet of Allah, Ayyub
(ulang 3x)	(repeat 3x)

In everyday Gayo language, *kumen* usually means an invisible small creature that causes itching. This word *kumen* seems to be the root of the word 'kuman' in everyday Indonesian, which means germ. In Gayo, a person is said to be *'kona kumen'* (afflicted by *kumen*) when a part of their body itches, usually with a connotation of a disease caused by black magic. The above spell mentions the essence name of the specific *kumen* that affects teeth: *kadu.* The spell then refers to the Prophet Ayyub, who in Islam, is described as a prophet tested by Allah through a skin disease. Prophet Ayyub suffered greatly for many years due to his illness, including losing his family and wealth. Nevertheless, he remained submissive to Allah, his faith never wavered, and thus he was healed and his fortune was restored twofold. Therefore, this spell attempts to draw a parallel between the disease that afflicted Prophet Ayyub and dental disease, as well as between God's power in healing Prophet Ayyub and healing dental disease.

In relation to the environment, elephants *(gajah)* and tigers *(kule)* are the two animals with the most spells in Gayo knowledge. The following is a spell recited when encountering an elephant:

Table 4 The elephant encounter spell

Gayo	English Translation
O, Reje Amrah / Putri Ketijah	O, King Amrah / Princess Ketijah
Gip ko ari kami	Far be it from us

For male elephants, the essence name mentioned is *'Reje Amrah,'* (King Amrah) while for female elephants, it is *'Putri Ketijah.'* (Princess Ketijah). I am not certain who *'Reje Amrah'* refers to whereas *'Putri Ketijah'* seems to refer to Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad. This spell is used to make elephants move away from the one reciting it. In the history of the Prophet Muhammad, there is indeed a story about elephants, and even the year of his birth is referred to as the Year of the Elephant. This originates from the attack by Abraha, a war general from the Kingdom of Aksum, who attempted to destroy the Ka'bah in Mecca using elephants. However, the largest elephant in the army suddenly stopped at the border of Mecca and refused to enter. Then, the Quran states that Allah destroyed the army with hot stones carried by birds called *ababil*.

Sahali collected many versions of spells when dealing with tigers. Among them, the longest is as follows:

Table 5 The tiger encounter spell

Gayo	English Translation
Reje di Burnsah	King in Burnsah
Reje Agam di gempulo	King Agam in gempulo
Bapakmu tuen taali	'Your father is Sir Ali

Ibumu tuen patimah	Your mother is Madam Fatimah
Ninimu Rasulullah	Your grandmother is the Messenger of Allah
Janganlah kau hampiri ku martabat tujuh	Do not approach The Seventh Rank
Tujuh alur tujuh pematang	Seven ridges, seven embankments
Jauh tuen, jauh reje jauh	Far away Sir, far away king
(token seger, huuuu….)	(shout once, huuuu….)

In various spells for tigers, Ali bin Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, frequently appears. This suggests the influence of Shia in Gayo society, as Ali himself is the first Shia Imam. In this spell, the tiger is asked not to come close to the human self, which is referred to as The Seventh Rank *(martabat tujuh).* The Seventh Rank is a Sufi teaching in the Indonesian archipelago that includes the belief that God manifests in His creation. At the end of the spell, the chanter needs to shout *'huuu…'* and the tiger will retreat as far as the sound of the shout can reach.

From the spells above, it appears that the essence name *(nama hakikat)* is the key to Gayo people's relation with non-humans. Looking at the meaning of *'hakikat'* in Indonesian Dictionary, there are two definitions of *hakikat*: 1) essence or basis; 2) the actual reality. Both definitions align with the way *hakikat* is understood in Gayo knowledge. This understanding can be compared to de la Cadena's (2015) work on Andean worlds. In her attempt to translate the names of Andean earth-beings to the 'modern' world, she discovered the importance of names:

> "To runakuna (Nazario included), tirakuna[2] *are* their names. More clearly, no separation exists between Ausangate the word and Ausangate the earth-being; no "meaning" mediates between the name and the being. This is precisely what the quote I used to open this section explains: earth-beings do not just *have* names; they *are* when mentioned, when they are called upon. But of course runakuna, including Nazario, are aware that to the likes of me (a non-Cuzqueño modern individual) earth-beings are mountains, and that as such they *have* names." (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 25)

According to Andean world ontology, there is no such thing as 'meaning.' When they speak of Ausangate, for example, they are not just saying a word. They are invoking the actual presence of Ausangate, the earth-being. This is difficult to understand for people with a different ontology, such as most 'modern' people, who can only see Ausangate as mountains; geographical features with names. In Gayo cosmology, it can also be said that by mentioning the essence name of things, Gayo people are not merely uttering a word, but they are calling out the real presence of that something, so there is no mediation, no 'meaning,' between a word and its existence.

In my opinion, this is also in line with Latour's (1993, p. 86) view that all entities, whether they belong to Nature or Society, exist before their essence. This means that their characteristics are not fixed but evolve over time through events and interactions. Thus, instead of seeing entities as having stable and inherent essences—in this context, names and meanings—we need to understand them as "events and trajectories" (Latour, 1993, p. 87) that continuously shape their essence. This make existence itself dynamic, where the boundaries between what is called Nature and Culture, or between words and beings, are fluid and interconnected. The next section will discuss how the relationship between Gayo community and nature reflects this dynamic interaction, where humans, animals, and spiritual entities continuously interact and shape each other's existence.

4.2 Humans Do Not Rule Over Nature

While modern societies often assert human dominance over nature, the Gayo people live within a lifeworld where humans coexist with nature rather than exploit it. Every place has its guardian, and proper ethics

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[2] In the Andean worlds, tirakuna are non-human beings, while runakuna are people, typically Quechua speakers, who engage in modern institutions while also acknowledging the existence of tirakuna in their lives (de la Cadena, 2015, p. xxiv).

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are required when dealing with them. This value was clear when I heard an explanation from Aman Badri, a traditional forest handler *(pengulu uten)* in Pondok Baru, Bener Meriah. Forest handlers are usually called in to start the procession of clearing new land for plantations. Gayo community still has traditional tiger handlers *(pawang kule),* bee handlers *(pawang lebah),* lake handlers *(pawang lut),* and water handlers *(pawang wih).* They are the ones who understand the relationships within the forest and the lake, as well as the relationships with animals such as tigers and bees. Aman Badri did not want to share the spells he used, but I assured him that I did not need the spell, only the story[3]. Aman Badri told me that the spell cannot be carelessly distributed for it could be very easy to misuse, especially if one does not understand the essence (*hakikat*). Dealing with the forest is also a big thing, according to Aman Badri, which requires inner strength and faith as it deals with many beings:

> "We pick up *(rai)* everyone: Jibrail (Gabriel), Mikail (Michael), Israfil, Izrail (Azrael), Umar, Usman, Ali, Abu Bakr, Sidang Tetap, Sidang Mukmin, Sidang Salih, Salih Salihin, water, fire, wind, everyone must be picked up. My hairs are standing up [pointing to fine hairs on his arms]. Everything must be picked up when we enter the forest. The guardians are Sidang Tetap, Sidang Mukmin. Wherever we stop, they are there. They are in the water, in the mountain, in the forest: Sidang Tetap, Sidang Mukmin, Sidang Salih, Salih Salihin, those are the people. So learn that. We begin everything with al-Fatihah, after that it is only *manat: 'You who guard the place, where? We seek permission from you because we are already here. This is me greeting you. We take care of each other.'* Then read al-Fatihah again. That is how we open the forest."

According to Aman Badri, every forest has *mpun tempat* (the place owner). No forest is empty or uninhabited. All forests are inhabited by animals and spectral beings responsible for guarding the place. Thus, when entering the forest, one must seek permission from all these entities, including those considered to have connections such as certain angels—Jibril, Mikail, Israfil, Izrail—and the four *Khulafaur Rasyidin* (the Rashidun, four caliphs)—Umar, Usman, Ali, and Abu Bakar. In Islamic tradition, angels *(Malai'ika)* are spiritual beings made of light who serve as divine messengers; Jibril delivers revelations from God, Mikail is in charge of weather and sustenance, Israfil will blow the trumpet on the Day of Judgment, and Izrail, the Angel of Death, takes souls as humans pass away. Seeing these four angels being invoked, it can be said that Gayo people seek Jibril's assistance to hear God's words, Mikail's help to safeguard their livelihood as their purpose in the forest is to seek sustenance, and the assistance of Israfil and Izrail to ensure that they do not commit any transgressions in the forest, thereby remaining sinless. In addition, the elements of nature are also invoked—water, fire, and wind. Following this, Aman Badri *memanati* (giving *manat*) that essentially involved greetings, introducing oneself, and pledging mutual care. Some spectral beings mentioned that sound unfamiliar are *Sidang Tetap, Sidang Mukmin, Sidang Salih*, and *Salih Salihin*. The Gayo-Dutch Dictionary apparently contains each of these names in the translation of the word *'Sidang'*:

> SIDANG I (L), sĕdang (G L), title placed before the names of some spirits…. the Honored One, the Lord. …. **Sidang Moe'min** [Sidang Mukmin], n.v.e. spirit, who is called **the Lord of Water**; **Sidang Salèh** [Sidang Salih], id, **Lord of the Wind**; **Sidang Salihin**, id, **Lord of Fire**; **Sidang Tĕtap**, id, **Lord of the Earth**; … (Hazeu, 1907, p. 843)[4]

From the brief descriptions in this dictionary, it appears that Sidang Tetap is the essence name of the guardian of the land, Sidang Mukmin is the guardian of the water, Sidang Salih is the guardian of the wind, and Sidang Salihin is the guardian of the fire. On the other hand, "sidang" in colloquial Gayo is related to the Indonesian word "sidang," referring to "a gathering of people" or the "public." Thus, the mention of these essence names may not refer to a single entity but to a collective name for a unity of many entities. It is also important to underline Aman Badri's statement that the fine hairs on his body stood up, a sign of goosebumps, at the mention of these beings. This statement also indicates that the mention is not merely a

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[3] In the end, Aman Badri said that he could have taught me these things if I could stay for a long time so as he need to show me many things.

[4] In Dutch: SIDANG I (L), *sĕdang* (G L), title voor de namen van sommige geesten geplaatst … de Geëerde, de Heer. …. Sidang Moe'min, n.v. e. geest, die wel de Heer v.h. Water genoemd wordt; Sidang Salèh, id., Heer v.d. Wind; Sidang Salihin, id., Heer v.h. Vuur; Sidang Tĕtap, id., Heer v. de Aarde; …. (Hazeu, 1907, p. 843)

calling of names, but an actual existence being invoked as there is no mediation between name and existence.

Regarding animals, Aman Badri states that we need to invoke Prophet Sulaiman as well, who, in Islamic tradition, is known as a prophet capable of communicating with all kinds of animals. Reflecting on Prophet Sulaiman, Aman Badri explains that in the forest we do not have enemies. However, the two-way communication is not actually achieved between humans and animals, but humans can give *manat* to animals:

> "When we are in the forest, we no longer have enemies. Our only enemies, my child, are devils and demons. Everything else is a friend. Do not consider anything an enemy! That's why it's difficult to learn. I used to go with young people, looking for sandalwood, and then an elephant appears. *'Oi!'* Just talk to him. *'Don't go too far, we have no friends.'* We moved to this side, he [the elephant] also moved to this side. The next day we went home, he walked first to show us the way. We do not ask permission from him but from *mpun tempat* (the place owner). Just ask for permission. There is no direct communication with them (two-way), only *manat."*

Although humans can give *manat* to animals, it does not mean that humans have the right to rule over them. Humans and animals are friends so giving *manat* does not mean creating superiority over animals. As Aman Badri's *manat* to the elephant, *'Don't go too far, we have no friends'* is not a command but rather an emphasis and acknowledgement that they are equal and help each other. In some cases, respect for animals is also practiced, especially with tigers, in a simple manner:

> "When we talk in the forest, or in the village at night, we should not say '*kule '*(tiger). (It should be) *'Pake ni'* (these people) or *'datu ni'* (this great grandfather). The manner of saying it is subtle, because it is assumed they are listening. They are about half animal, half astral being."[5]

A similar respect for animals is also evident in the Koyukon society of Alaska, as studied by Ingold (2011). For example, the Koyukon term for a brown bear can be translated as 'bad animal.' However, this name would not be used in the forest for fear of offending the bear by being described as such. Instead, people would refer to them as 'big animals,' 'those who are in the mountains,' or even 'keep out of their way' (Ingold, 2011, p. 174).

Between humans and animals in a place, there is *mpun tempat* (the place owner) that ensures both can coexist and receive their respective rights. *Mpun tempat* is also the spectral being[6] that usually keeps everyone in the forest behaving ethically. A story was told by Aman Wirdi when he was working in the forest with his friends, helping someone clear land for a plantation. At that time, it was drizzling, and Aman Wirdi and the others returned to the hut where they rested. However, one of his friends continued working in the drizzle. But soon, that person also took shelter. He asked the others, "Who was wearing the turban and *batik* shirt earlier? Is he the owner of the plantation?" The others shook their heads. They did not know and they did not see him. The owner of the plantation was also not there. After all, an Arabic turban and Indonesian *batik* are not a common fashion pairing. His friend then said that the person in turban had told him to stop working: *'That's enough. Take a break. It's raining.'* After delivering the *manat,* he disappeared into the mist. They eventually concluded that it was *mpun tempat* (the place owner), who gave them *manat* to not work in the rain as it could be dangerous.

The principle that humans are not above nature is also a key foundation in the more-than-human rights movement. As Will Kymlicka (2024) explains, the idea of human supremacy over animals and nature has historically justified the exploitation of animals and the environment. Non-humans have been excluded from the moral community because they are considered incapable of rational thought, communication, and consciousness like humans. Such hierarchical foundations are actually dangerous as they can even dehumanize marginalized groups (Kymlicka, 2024). Kymlicka (2024) suggests that to reach more-than-human rights, the rights should be based on other principles such as vulnerability, the capability of beings to live lives of dignity and flourishing, care, and reciprocity. Gayo's understanding of the absence of hierarchy aligns with this argument, viewing humans as part of a complex and interdependent network with spectral beings, animals, plants, and other elements of nature. Gayo practice of seeking permission

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[5] Conversation with Sahali on April 7, 2024.

[6] I see a similarity with the Nusu's concept of *mikhru* described in Mazard's (2018, p. 25) study. She portrays *mikhru* as spectral beings that dwell in mountains and forests, possessing predatory and transformative abilities.

and showing respect to the guardians of places and animals reflects the recognition of non-human entities as members of the moral community. The following section will include other stories about reciprocal practices and care between humans and non-humans in Gayo.

4.3 On Sharing and Working Together

Considering the various explanations above, human knowledge of the *hakikat* (essence) of non-humans is necessary to be able to create communication between them. However, in practice, people can give *manat* directly without needing to know the essence names. Such a story comes from Aman Ari. I first heard this story from Sahali, then I confirmed it with Aman Ari on April 9, 2024. He told me the full story:

> "Indeed, everything was destroyed. Then there was a grandpa in Dedalu, Grandpa Iman, (he said that) usually people give *manat,* communicate with and advise the monkey. Finally, I tried, directly talked to the monkey. When I went to the water below, to take a bath, I saw a group of monkeys. One sat on a tree, he looked at me. I was carrying soap, a bucket, going to take a bath. I kept talking to myself like a madman. If someone looked at me, they would laugh, they would think I was crazy. Just that one monkey remained while the others had already left when I went down to the water. He sat still [demonstrating sitting with knees bent], on the tree trunk. He was watching me talking. *'Inside this fence is our right, so do not disturb it. Tell your friends, everything inside this fence is our right. We are also looking for food. If you want to find food, go outside the fence. That is your right.'* That is all I said. Before, the guava was gone, there was never any fruit. After giving *manat,* there were no more disturbances; for two years, not a single fruit was touched (by the animals)."

Aman Ari himself learned this method from someone else's story, a story told by Grandpa Iman. Grandpa Iman did not have a farm; he only told other people's stories and Aman Ari implemented it out of frustration. Previously, every Sunday when he visited his farm, the durians had fallen prematurely. He lost about one sack of durians every week. Aman Ari had never attempted anything to scare away the monkeys before. He only spoke to the monkeys through *manat* and this practice has proven to be effective. Aman Ari emphasized how the monkey was watching him intently, but also expressed his disbelief in being able to communicate directly with the monkey, as reflected in his way of saying: *"I kept talking to my self…"* instead of speaking to the monkey and imagining how others would consider his actions strange, just like a madman.

This experience demonstrates the power of storytelling which is in line with Joshua B. Cohen (2013) who states that when someone tells a story well, listeners can imagine themselves experiencing the same things as the storyteller. Listeners will choose between accepting, learning, rejecting, or forgetting a story depending on how they relate the story to past or possible future experiences (Cohen, 2013, p. 91). Grandpa Iman, the storyteller, narrates third-party accounts of experience and he further transforms it into the experience of the person hearing his story, Aman Ari. Here, Aman Ari feels connected to the story told by Grandpa Iman, and imagines the possibility of using the story to deal with his problem with the monkeys in his farm. Aman Ari's *manat* to the monkey did not come from a fixed sentence structure, like a spell, but creatively arose from his own anxiety and resignation. He does not hate the monkeys but he positions himself and them as equals; both searching for food, with each having their place and share in the forest.

In general, similar stories can be found throughout Aceh Province. For example, Devi I. Chadijah (2017) writes about *Panglima Uteun* (Aceh's traditional forest handlers) in Nagan Raya and one of his roles is as follows:

> *Panglima uteun* has the authority to prohibit everyone from entering the forest on certain days as determined by *panglima uteun* based on his knowledge. With his knowledge, *panglima uteun* knows if there are tigers or elephants or other wild animals *(cagee)* that are roaming in the forest area around them, and to ensure the safety of the villagers, *panglima uteun* prohibits them on those specific days to enter the forest. (Chadijah, 2017, p. 7) (translated from Indonesian)

From this explanation, although tigers and elephants are considered wild animals, meaning that they cannot coexist with humans as they can cause harm, another interpretation that can be drawn is how *Panglima Uteun* understands the forest not solely belonging to humans, but also to all the animals and other

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entities within it. Therefore, there are days when humans should not make a living in the forest, as they need to share with the forest's inhabitants.

Although wild animals are considered frightening, they can also be cooperative. Gayo people are familiar with the 'supernatural tiger,' which is difficult to define as entirely supernatural. In some stories, this tiger can take physical form and be seen in both appearance and tracks. There are stories coming from my mother about my great grandfather—I call him 'Datu'—who kept this kind of tiger to guard his farm. Those with malicious intent in his farm would definitely see the tiger. My uncle also told me about this in detail. Interestingly, the story did not come directly from Datu, but from someone who lived in the same village as Datu, in Kemili Village. Uncle met one such villager while this person was serving as a *Geuchik* (head of village) in Angkup. Knowing that Uncle was Datu's grandson, *Geuchik* was surprised and began to tell him that Datu used to be a respected person for he was known for keeping a tiger to guard his farm. Datu once planted corn and the crop was very fertile. One day, Datu went to the city for some business. Two men entered the farm, took the corn, and put it into sacks. After two sacks were filled, they immediately left the farm but suddenly a tiger blocked their way. Spontaneously, they threw the sacks of corn and ran in the opposite direction, only to be blocked by another tiger. They screamed, panicking because they could not escape. Both were trapped in the farm. Hearing people screaming in the farm, *Geuchik* called Datu. Datu returned to his farm and found the two people trapped inside. He asked them what they were doing in his farm. They replied, "Nothing, we were just playing around." Datu said that they must have done something bad to be disturbed and unable to get out. They still did not confess. Finally, Datu said that he would leave and let them trapped in the farm. Hearing that, the two thieves were scared and finally confessed.

> Thieves: "We took the corn…"
> Datu: "If that is the case then it is clear (that you are doing something wrong).
>   Have you taken a lot?"
> Thieves: "For each, one sack."
> Datu: "Then take it. But after this, do not try to enter this farm, okay?
>   Just once, do not do it anywhere else either."

In the conversation, it is evident how Datu applied justice to the thieves. There was a sense of compassion despite his crops being stolen. Ultimately, Datu forgave them and allowed them to leave with the stolen corn. The experience served as a lesson for the thieves not to repeat the offense. The thieves' initial refusal to confess illustrates the dishonesty and mistakes that often lead to more severe consequences. The admission of guilt eventually sets them free. The tiger here is not only helping Datu in guarding his farm, nor can its presence be interpreted solely as an assertion of Datu's authority over the surrounding population. The tiger also helps maintain the moral order in the community, where all actions is always under scrutiny.

These practices align with the Rights of Nature (RoN), a legal and philosophical concept that seeks to extend moral and legal rights to nature, including ecosystems, animals, rivers, forests, and other non-human entities (Jamieson, 2024). The traditional, anthropocentric idea of rights, based on human language and reason, needs to be reconsidered (Jamieson, 2024). *Manat* demonstrates how humans and non-humans can communicate without relying on the same language or rationality. What is required is the recognition of the agency and rights of non-human entities, which, according to Jamieson (2024), can be achieved through a relational worldview. Gayo understanding that humans and non-humans each have their place and role in the forest is a practical manifestation of this relational worldview.

5 Conclusion

Human-animal encounters are often resolved by killing the animal when it is perceived as disruptive or capable of harming humans. However, Gayo community demonstrates a different approach of dealing with such issues, one that is wiser and effective. Gayo people continue to manifest harmony with various non-human entities and do not put humans as the main character. Although this cannot be measured for its 'scientific' effectiveness, the stories in this paper provide real existential evidence that cannot be ignored. Modern epistemological measurement cannot assess this because their way of classifying reality detaches it from its context and relationships. Therefore, as Ingold (2011) puts it: *"stories always, and inevitably, draw together what classifications split apart."* (Ingold, 2011, p. 160). Stories are capable of capturing the messy reality of the world in which we live in so that we do not take shortcuts, reductionists way, to explain the world we inhabit. By using storytelling as a method, this research highlights how Gayo epistemology

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challenges dominant and compartmentalized views of nature and culture, offering a more fluid and relational understanding of existence.

The use of *manat* demonstrates how Gayo people negotiate their existence in the world, where relationships with animals, plants, and spiritual beings are an integral part of survival. However, this practice is not merely remnants of the past in the sense of a stable, unchanged tradition unaffected by modern life. *Manat* is still creatively used in the present-day Gayo community to address various issues, not only to maintain ecological balance but also ethical relationships between all beings. Gayo community offers valuable insights into sustainable and harmonious ways of living through the power of communication and empathy. Integrating this knowledge with formal conservation efforts can result in more effective and sustainable forest management practices. In this way, the preservation of *manat* and other Gayo practices can contribute to combating environmental degradation and ensure that local life space and biodiversity are protected in the face of external pressures such as mining and deforestation.

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