

Reimagining Javan Tigers:

Macan Cisewu, double extinction, and human-animal relations in the digital age.

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In 2017, a photo of a tiger statue at a military post in Java went viral on Indonesian social media. Carved by a soldier to project the army's ferocity, it instead looked goofy and overly friendly. Nicknamed Macan Cisewu online, it was later replaced by the army with a properly menacing one. But by then, Macan Cisewu had proliferated into various memes online. This small, funny failure opens a larger question: what does it mean to invoke, mock, and remember an animal that no longer exists?

I propose the concept of double extinction to describe two entangled losses: the disappearance of the Javan tiger itself, and the displacement of the Javanese knowledges, kinships, and ontologies through which it was understood. Where recent work on "societal extinction" traces species fading from collective memory, I argue that this second loss does not empty the tiger of meaning but multiplies it. While colonial agricultural expansion and natural history cast the tiger as a pest and specimen, the tiger now proliferates online and offline: as guardian, as football mascot, as a spirit to be invoked, as a sign of military prowess, and most recently as memes and AI-generated videos. Tracing how an extinct species is remembered shows how its loss has generated new ecologies of symbolic meaning.

Drawing on hantologi, my decolonial approach to haunting as ethnographic method, I read Indonesian social media as a contested site. Users reproduce and challenge colonial and traditional framings of the tiger even as they begin a conversation of their own, in humour, ridicule, and memory. That conversation itself is haunted by colonialism, developmentalism and increasingly by platform algorithms that decide what circulates and what is remembered. Attending to a haunted species, including the ways it still haunts us, offers a way of thinking about loss that does not treat it as finished: learning from what has already been lost in order to see what is still being lost, what is being built, and how to care for what remains.

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Tito Ambyo is an Indonesian-Australian anthropologist and journalism lecturer at RMIT University, Melbourne. He researches haunted ecologies and extinction in Indonesia, and is currently a research fellow at KITLV, Leiden University. He co-hosts the Talking Indonesia podcast and is a board member of Inside Indonesia magazine.

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