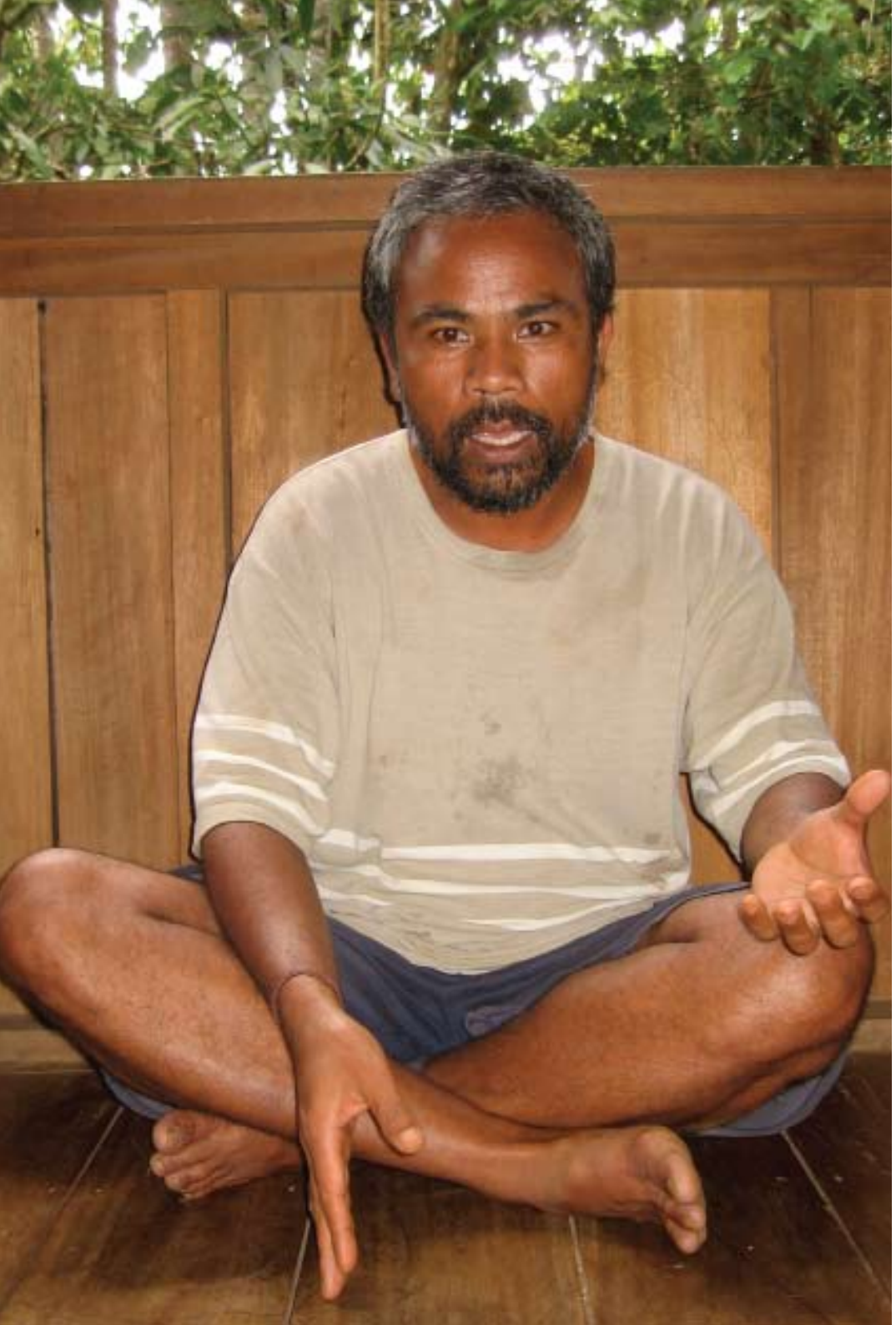
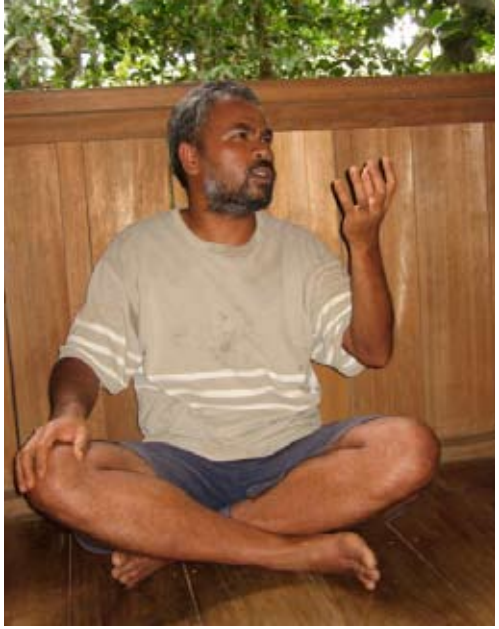


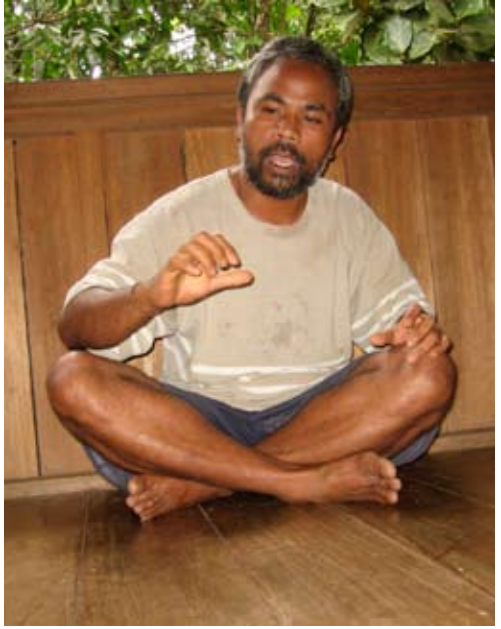
DANTE SINHAYAN
Lumad

Dante Sinhayan is a 34-year old emerging tribal leader in the uplands of Bukidnon in Mindanao, married, with a two-year old daughter. The interview is interesting in that Dante narrated his story echoing the traditional form of a datu introducing himself as he entered a village, "tungkod" or staff in hand. Starting with his parents, every event in his life was well-accounted for in his memory.

"My father is from Kalabugaw and my mother is from Bulunay and when they got married they settled in Kalabugaw, where I was born in 1973. My father was a farmer. We moved to Bulunay when I was still young, where I grew up and went to school from Grade 1 to 3. I went back to Kalabugaw to continue my elementary schooling from Grade 4 to 6. Nobody could support me in high school, so I searched for a sponsor. I went to Kabanglasan and met Father Leoni, who sponsored me up to my third year in college when he died. Father Matt took over until I finished college. Upon my graduation, I went back to my village."

"There I saw the many changes in the forest. There were a lot of denuded areas, and we were still gathering many of the forest products we were using: rattan, medicines, timber for housing, and timber that we were selling to the Dumagat. The hunting grounds of my parents, my grandparents changed. Nobody told me why these forest





changes took place that I was seeing, but I heard from the elders as I listened to them as they discussed. The changes in the forest of my village were significantly caused by the entry of logging."

"For the people and for myself, logging clearly caused the destruction. But the impact did not register in our minds, the importance of what was destroyed was not established. There were no efforts to revive the forest, especially the ritual areas, the hunting grounds, the sacred places. In Bulunay, the Pugawan ritual area was totally removed and bulldozed. I am also seeing the scarcity of the resources that we collect in the forest. Seldom do I see now people carrying forest-based food."

"Then the Baptist preachers came who told us that participating in ritual acts was evil. I was baptized a Baptist and this was the dominant religion in our area. I was taught that rituals are not good and I turned away from my traditional beliefs. But now I realize I should not have abandoned the ritual areas, because these are the sacred places where we can care for the forest continuously. And if the forest is gone, where will we do our rituals, in the middle of the road? We do our rituals in the water, but water comes from the forest! This is what I see at the moment that is also the future."

"But people did not think about reconstructing what was damaged. We are letting the forest go and saying to ourselves it is already damaged anyway. We go back and revisit the forest to

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process or cut trees and establish farms, not to revive the ritual areas and sacred places that our next generation could see. This is not discussed in my village."

"The entry of logging and the bulldozing of farms discouraged us and contributed to people caring less. Our adupahan was bulldozed and the owners did not resist or ask for payments, as no negotiations took place. Owners were employed by the logging companies as workers and helped in the bulldozing. People did not go back to caring for the village, the sacred places, and the forest so that more food could be gathered in the future. In short, nobody cared!"

"As a grown-up, I am saddened by what took place. And as time has passed, there are groups entering Bulunay who are slowly awakening my village. Watershed management is a phrase we now hear, and the lowlanders are slowly sowing, starting, reinstating in us the feeling of the forest's importance. The forest gets discussed and the watershed; how important is the forest, what is this watershed. Thus, care for the forest is growing again, slowly."

"I talked with a member of our village council and the entry of this program is allowing people to care again for the forest. And indeed it is true that this care is growing slowly in people's minds and hearts. My hope is that this continues and will not stop when these outsiders leave. Our aspirations to continue caring for the forest must not be lost, for as Lumad, once the forest is gone, so will our being a Lumad go as well. We can still be proud of being a Lumad, but the forest is one of our real identities. The forests differentiate what we feel when we are in the city. If the forest is gone, we lose what we call as Lumad. We may still be Lumad, but in rituals only. How do we live? This is discouraging for us."

"If we care less for the forest, we will not live without the forest. I cannot live without the forest. Without the forest, I feel different in the city seeing big buildings. It is too hot. In the forest, it is cool and I hear the sounds of different birds. The changes make me reflect and mixes me up in how I think. It is natural that a Lumad cannot survive in the city. Thus, being a Lumad in itself is a great challenge as it also means taking care of the forest."

"One time I went to the city port to fetch someone who was arriving, and there were Badjao kids in the water near the docking area, begging for money from passengers and other visitors. (The Badjao culture is sea-based and they live in the poorest region in the country. Many of them migrate to different areas in the country.) Coins were thrown at them and they dive in the water to get the coins. I threw one peso and the kids replied that it was too small! I was surprised that the kids were not Badjao and they came from Claveria, in the uplands near my

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place. I asked them why they are in the city. One of the kids told me that it was difficult in their place, things will not grow, crops will not grow without fertilizer, and they do not have fertilizer. He told me it is better in the city as money is easy. He told me they were many before, but some went home as they cannot cope. Some are able to adapt, but most are unable to sustain themselves."

"This is why I realized that if the Lumad is put in the city, they can live for some time, but they will not survive for long and will return to their origin. But where will they return if the forest is gone, the land is gone? The identity of the Lumad as a person is tied to what we call ancestral domain. The forest marks our ancestral domain and ensures that Lumad who went to the city has a place to return. Ancestral domain also ensures forest protection, and if the forest vanishes, then what the Lumad keeps talking about as ancestral domain also vanishes. There may be something left over, but it is not the same, if people understand what is called ancestral domain. Even if food is scarce, the forest brings one to reflect and connect as a Lumad. If I were not a Lumad, my appreciation of the forest will be limited. The lowland appreciation of the splendor of the Lumad needs to be defined well, explained well. What I expressed is the Lumad's appreciation, view, and experience of the goodness of the forest as their life. If the forest is lost, the more the Lumad is lost."

"The importance of water is also inseparable to the Lumad and ancestral domain discussions. Everyday, every minute, we use water and with it, we discuss forest, although not often. By discussing how water emerges, then the forest gets discussed. Then the whole area gets discussed, how to care, how good it is, and what if we lose this? In the city, they can buy water, but the Lumad cannot."

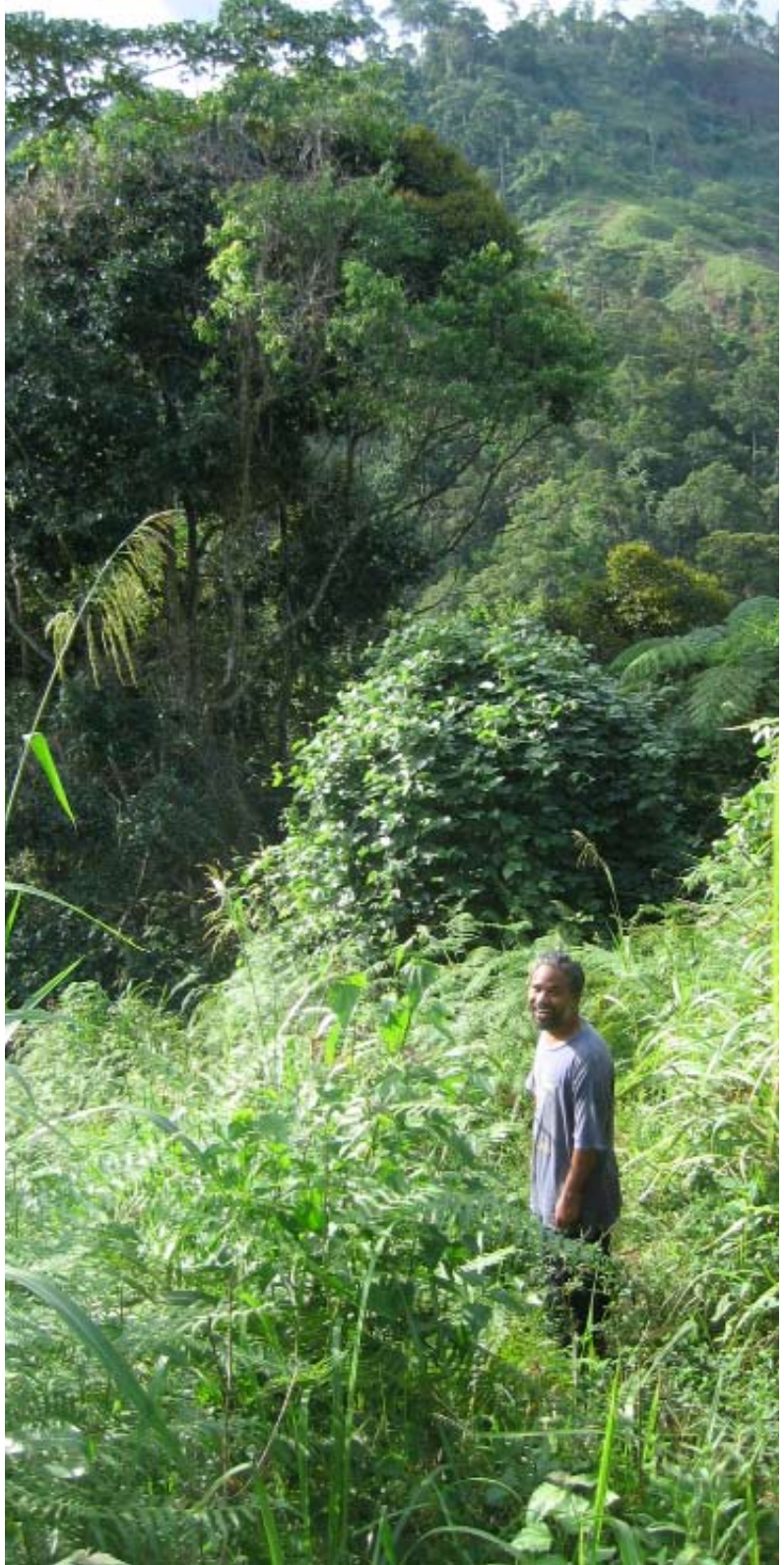
"The Lumad's life is the forest, and we are in the frontline in caring for the forest and the resources therein. If it gets destroyed, the Lumad gets affected first. If the forest is eroded, the water is polluted, and the Lumad will be affected first before the lowlanders. And often we cannot defend and prevent the difficulties that will

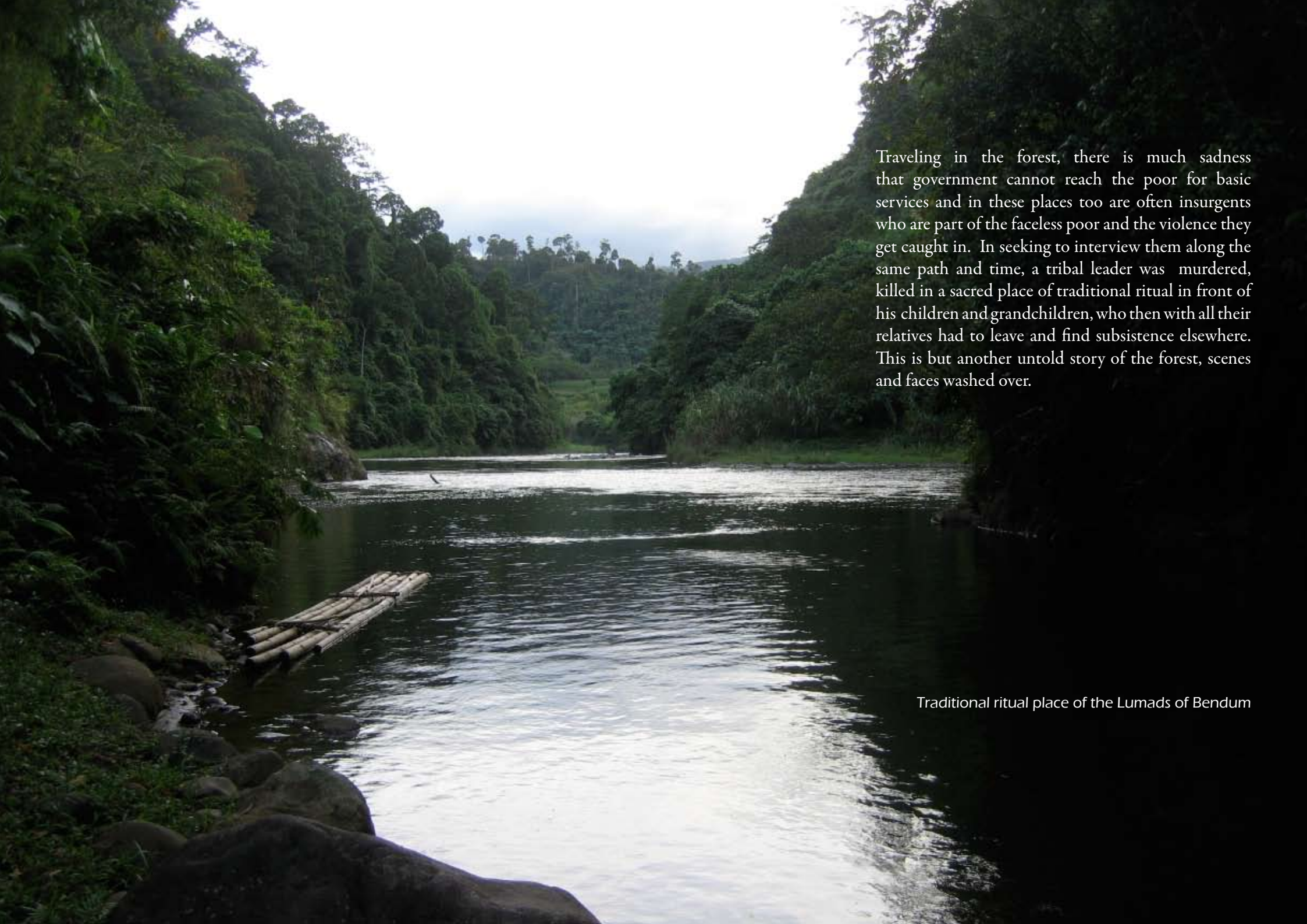
be experienced. Severe landslides also damage the water, and we have minimal skills in seeking assistance down the valley. We may get re-settled in another village, which will cause another problem as we will be claiming land which will not be ours."

"On a number of occasions, I gave inputs in the school for the children, particularly the Lumad, on the different ways to take care of the forest and that these ought to start with us. The Lumad can always go down the valley, but we will not survive. I related the story of the Lumad who tried selling bread, but who returned after a few months because he cannot survive."

"I will continue relating this care of the forest with my work and talk with the community, the children, the Tribal Council. I express, during these meetings, that caring for the forest is not a game and is not based on apprehensions and assumptions. Forest care is based on real events for us, the Lumad, because if we will not settle in the forest, we will not survive. Taking care of the forest leads to good things for people. Sometimes the topics discussed lack focus, but these still need to be discussed. We discuss sacred places, timber extraction, and these realities need to be passed on to the elders and to the children."

"Everyone is challenged to care for whatever we have now, as whatever destruction takes place in the forest, the Lumad will be most affected. But the Lumad does not have the knowledge to respond to these damaging events where we do not care for the forest and will be damaging our lives. So that's it!"





Traveling in the forest, there is much sadness that government cannot reach the poor for basic services and in these places too are often insurgents who are part of the faceless poor and the violence they get caught in. In seeking to interview them along the same path and time, a tribal leader was murdered, killed in a sacred place of traditional ritual in front of his children and grandchildren, who then with all their relatives had to leave and find subsistence elsewhere. This is but another untold story of the forest, scenes and faces washed over.

Traditional ritual place of the Lumads of Bendum