

A River Flows Through It

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Quite a few years ago I had the good fortune to be able to fly over and around Kuala Lumpur in a helicopter, and things look very different from up there. On ground level you get used to the concrete, cars and roads of a modern metropolis but if you can ascend you discover that Kuala Lumpur is surrounded by jungle. It should be obvious, but you forget. From above you can see a stark fault-line between the ever expanding city and the jungle that in some directions stretches on and on. Years of continual logging have meant that the trees are smaller than they once were and who knows if there are any large animals still alive down there but many if not most of Malaysia's urban centres are still encircled in this way. It's clear from above that the city and the jungle have nothing in common, they are a threat to each other and it's hard to see how they are able to inhabit the same land. But with the tropical sun directly overhead the light glints on the element that binds the two together – the rivers. Despite the fissure on the land there is still something that flows through.

As a nation Malaysia would appear to have more apparent fissures than connections. It's split between an east and west, separated by the South China Sea. East Malaysia is split between Sabah and Sarawak. Western peninsular Malaysia (where the majority of us live) is also split between an east and west, separated by a jungle-covered mountainous spine. Our landscape is split between the urban and the jungle that still covers most of the country. As a people we're split racially between Malay, Chinese, Indian, Ceylonese, Iban, Kadazan, aboriginals, Nyonya, and a myriad of others, and each group in turn can be split into regional, ethnic or language sub-groups. We're split between the secular and the, er, not so secular. Our history can be split between post-colonial and colonial, the interpretations of which have split us from our memory (the pre-colonial is rarely mentioned).