

## Informal Economic Activities at The Borders: Balancing Well-Being and Nusantara Development

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### Abstract

Nusantara, a newly established metropolis in East Borneo, aspires to facilitate connections between the region of Kalimantan and neighbouring states such as Sabah, Sarawak and the Philippines by deploying advanced technology and infrastructure. Even with substantial investments aimed at modernizing Kalimantan, indigenous subethnic communities residing along Sarawak and Kalimantan's borders persist in engaging with traditional informal economic activities, particularly at the confluence of these regions. This paper investigates the prevalence and significance of barter systems and the exchange of goods, including certain commodities frequently classified as illegal under specific regulatory frameworks. While several of these activities may encompass smuggling elements, they do not involve illicit items such as narcotics, weapons or human trafficking, thereby necessitating a re-evaluation of security and safety considerations in the area. Through narrative interviews conducted with five prominent leaders from border communities representing diverse cultural and social backgrounds, alongside non-participant observations of local practices, this study examines the contribution of informal economic activities to these border communities' stability and ecological balance. The findings challenge prevailing perceptions that categorize these activities as a mere grey area phenomenon, revealing their crucial role in fostering mutual benefits, establishing familial trust and enhancing collective tolerance. These informal exchanges are vital for the community's survival, illustrating a complex social and economic interdependence web. This research offers essential insights into the dynamics of informal economies within border regions, underscoring their often-neglected role in fostering social cohesion and resilience. By providing practical implications for policy development and community relations, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between informal economic activities and regional stability.

Keywords: Border Communities; Kinships; Nusantara; Informal Economy; Safety

### Introduction

Border studies in East Borneo have historically concentrated on matters concerning safety and security, frequently emphasizing threats such as overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea, migration influxes, the Sultan Sulu heritage territorial dispute, as well as issues related to piracy, smuggling, terrorism and separatism. Although these concerns regarding state sovereignty are significant, this paper redirects its focus toward non-traditional security dimensions by analysing

the informal economic activities that occur daily among communities at the borders of Sarawak and Kalimantan. This study examines the informal economic interactions among indigenous communities, illustrating how these activities enhance the region's social framework and ecological stability. By tackling the inquiry of how informal economies operate at the borders and their implications for community dynamics, this research aspires to address existing gaps in the literature.

Furthermore, it investigates the sociological factors that sustain these border activities, including local habitats, flora and fauna while considering the contributions of indigenous and non-indigenous communities within this ecosystem. Gaining insights into these dynamics enriches our understanding of border studies. It emphasizes the significance of informal economies in fostering resilience and social cohesion in light of traditional security concerns and challenges.

Research concerning the border communities of Sarawak and Kalimantan has primarily concentrated on spatial interactions and cultural dynamics. Ishikawa's anthropological methodology investigates how historical memory and cultural identity establish the social foundation essential for the survival of border communities, which are ultimately influenced by internationally recognized political boundaries. He posits that these social evolutions are crucial in the Archipelago Capital's ongoing development in East Kalimantan.

Langub<sup>1</sup> further elaborates on the complexities of identity within the Ba'kelalan highland border community, highlighting their fluid and adaptable identity as vital for survival. He investigates the kinship relationships between the Ba'kelalan and the Lun Bawang community. He stresses that cultural and historical elements rooted in blood relationships are essential for nurturing sustainable interdependence and trust. These factors facilitate trade and social cohesion in cross-border regions. Recent studies including those conducted by UNICEF<sup>2</sup> have underscored the significance of informal economies in enhancing community resilience in border areas illustrating how these economic practices foster social networks that mitigate risks associated with political instability. Similarly, research by Edwin & Floranesia<sup>3</sup> explores the intersection of informal trade and cultural identity positing that informal economic activities have the potential to strengthen community bonds and contribute to the preservation of culture in border regions areas.

In contrast, studies by Tantiana & Askandar<sup>4</sup> and Jalli & Sualman<sup>5</sup> address security concerns specific to other Sarawak border communities particularly the Bidayuh in the Danau Melikin, Serian and Telok Melano areas. Their findings highlight the vulnerabilities posed by porous borders and the lack of control, patrol authority and protection against crime as expressed through community grievances on platforms like Facebook.

Konig<sup>6</sup> and Karulus and Suadik<sup>7</sup> focus on the legal context of border safety, discussing regulatory loopholes that threaten community integrity. Konig critiques international law provisions and their implications for Malaysia's border sovereignty. Karulus and Suadik investigate how safety concerns are intertwined with identity politics, reflecting the protective instincts of families and tribes.

Bakar et al.<sup>8</sup> conduct anthropological investigations into the well-being of communities along the Sarawak-Kalimantan borders, primarily focusing on daily interactions and barter trade as mechanisms for economic sufficiency. However, they still need to address these activities' implications for community resilience fully. This gap is further echoed in the work of Zaini<sup>9</sup>, who argue that informal economies are vital for enhancing social capital and fostering collective action among border communities.

This paper aims to critically investigate the informal economic activities within the border communities of Sarawak and Kalimantan, with four key objectives:

1. The research will analyse economic dynamics by dissecting specific informal economic practices, such as barter systems and the trade of rare goods, and their roles in shaping community interactions and identities at the borders.
2. To Examine Sociocultural Impacts: The paper will assess how these economic activities influence social cohesion, kinship networks and cultural identity among Indigenous communities, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of community resilience.
3. To Address Security Implications: The paper will explore the implications of informal economies for traditional security concerns, arguing that depending on their regulation and community perceptions these practices can enhance or undermine safety.
4. To Identify Policy Recommendations: Finally, the research will offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers highlighting the need for integrating informal economic activities into broader developmental strategies that respect cultural practices while addressing security challenges.

Through these aims, this paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on border studies and informal economies emphasizing their critical role in shaping border communities' social and economic landscapes.

## **Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach, integrating nonparticipant observation and narrative interviews with key informants from border communities to explore the informal economic activities at the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. This methodological framework is well-suited for capturing the complex social dynamics and cultural contexts that characterize border communities allowing for a nuanced understanding of informal economies.

## **Sampling and Participant Selection**

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, focusing on individuals with in-depth knowledge and experience related to informal economic activities in their communities. This approach ensures that the data collected are rich and relevant, as participants were chosen based on their roles as community leaders or active participants in informal trade. Engaging respondents from diverse tribes specifically Lun Dayeh, Lun Bawang, Bidayuh and Iban provides a multi-faceted perspective on the socio-economic interactions at the border.

## **Data Collection Methods**

The narrative interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format allowing for flexibility in questioning. This conversational approach fosters trust and encourages participants to share personal stories and insights that reveal underlying social norms and practices. The absence of a rigid protocol empowers participants to steer the conversation, potentially uncovering unexpected themes and deeper meanings related to their informal economic activities.

From January to March 2022, nonparticipant observation was conducted in Serikin and nearby areas. This observational phase provided contextual insights into the daily lives of community members, capturing the nuances of their interactions and economic practices in real-time. Such

immersive fieldwork is essential for understanding the socio-economic landscape as it allows the researcher to witness the interplay between informal economies and community life.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis, thematic analysis and content interpretation were employed to identify and analyse patterns within the qualitative data systematically. This process involved coding the data to extract key themes that connect socio-historical contexts with contemporary informal economic activities. By contextualizing these findings within the broader framework of border studies, the research aims to illustrate how informal economies contribute to community resilience and social cohesion.

### **Translation and Triangulation**

Interviews were conducted in the respondents' native languages with a translator present to ensure accurate communication. This is particularly important in qualitative research as language can significantly influence the expression of cultural nuances and experiences. To enhance the validity of the data, transcripts were reviewed by community representatives, serving as a triangulation process that verifies the accuracy of translations and interpretations. This step strengthens the credibility of the findings and fosters community involvement in the research process aligning with ethical research practices.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Respondents' names were retained in the paper to maintain the authenticity of the primary data, and prior consent was obtained to respect participants' rights and identities. This commitment to ethical standards emphasizes the importance of transparency and respect for community voices, acknowledging these communities' contributions to the research process.

In other words, this paper seeks to illuminate the complexities of informal economic activities in border communities through this robust methodological framework. By employing qualitative methods that prioritize participant narratives and contextual understanding the research aims to significantly contribute to the discourse on border studies and informal economies, highlighting their roles in enhancing social cohesion, community resilience and cultural preservation in the face of contemporary challenges.

### **The Grey Area Phenomena Concept: A Reinterpretation of Border Dynamics**

The "grey area phenomena," as articulated by Chalk and Ward<sup>10</sup>, typically refers to regions where illicit activities such as organized crime, underground economies, trafficking in weapons and drugs, and militant movements flourish. These activities predominantly occur at borders, where jurisdictional ambiguities, inconsistent legal frameworks, and frequent interagency disputes create a conducive environment for such phenomena. These grey areas are exacerbated by unstable governments or fluctuating military roles, which hinder effective enforcement and investigation. This phenomenon is not confined to a specific region but is observed globally, including in Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, South America, Africa, and the Middle East, where it poses significant threats to both state sovereignty and societal stability.<sup>11</sup> Addressing these threats necessitates coordinated efforts among state authorities, regional actors, and international stakeholders to minimize violence and maintain security.<sup>12</sup>

This paper acknowledges the relevance of the grey area concept in understanding these forms of insecurity, particularly in the context of border regions such as Sarawak-Kalimantan. However, it challenges the assumption that these borders are merely sites of illicit activity and violence. In the Sarawak-Kalimantan borderlands, the informal economic activities that occur—often associated with smuggling—are not necessarily driven by criminal intent or aimed at illegal profiteering. Instead, they primarily involve goods that serve the daily sustenance and survival of local communities. These practices are deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric of the border regions, reflecting long-standing cultural and economic traditions that resist simplistic criminalization. As noted by Zaini<sup>13</sup> informal economies in such regions often play a crucial role in ensuring local livelihood, providing a counterbalance to formal state structures that may be distant or ineffective.

By employing a sociological lens, this article moves beyond traditional understandings of borders as zones of conflict and instead examines how the interactions within these regions foster social cohesion and resilience. The concept of the “acephalous” society—one without formalized hierarchical authority structures—emerges as a critical element in explaining the social organization of these border communities. The interconnectedness of these communities, not only through informal economic practices but also through kinship and marriage, contributes to a dynamic of mutual reliance and trust that transcends territorial boundaries. These familial and cultural linkages form a vital counterpoint to the notion of the border as a locus of threat, suggesting that the survival and thriving of border communities depend not solely on state control but also on these informal, culturally significant exchanges and relationships. Langub<sup>14</sup> highlights how the fluid and adaptable identity of border communities, such as the Ba’kelalan, is key to their survival and the mutual trust that facilitates trade across porous borders.

Moreover, these kinship bonds—strengthened through intermarriage between communities across Sarawak and Kalimantan—are essential in sustaining trust and social capital within the borderlands. They serve as mechanisms of solidarity, ensuring that local networks of exchange are protected and that resources are shared in ways that mitigate the risks posed by external threats, such as political instability or economic deprivation. These relationships form a vital part of the social contract that governs these border communities, underscoring their resilience in the face of both legal ambiguity and socio-economic challenges. According to Bakar et al.<sup>15</sup>, kinship and community networks are essential to understanding the resilience of border communities, particularly in regions where formal state control is limited or fragmented.

Thus, the grey area phenomena in this context cannot be reduced to a binary of criminality and lawlessness. Rather, it requires a more nuanced understanding of how informal economies operate within border regions—where cultural practices, social ties, and economic interdependence are key components of the stability and survival of these communities. In this light, the informal economic exchanges at the Sarawak-Kalimantan border should be viewed not as anomalous activities to be eradicated but as integral to the social and economic landscape of the region, contributing to both local resilience and broader regional stability. As Ishikawa<sup>16</sup> suggest, these informal exchanges can strengthen social capital and contribute to the preservation of local cultures, fostering resilience even in the face of political and economic turbulence.

This article acknowledges the significance of a grey area phenomenon in understanding the abovementioned threats. However, the expectation of such crimes, violence and illegal activities is anecdotal to borders in Sarawak-Kalimantan, which offers sociological observation of actual activities by border communities. The informal economic activities may involve smuggling, but the goods are for daily consumption. This article highlights the utilization of cultural existence in the acephalous form as ‘previous existed’ which defines the ‘later existence’ in connecting the dots of behaviors among border communities dwelling in Sarawak-Kalimantan that goes beyond traditional threat.

Also, familial relationships via marriages among communities in Sarawak and Kalimantan strengthen the bloodline, kinship and trust.

## **Discussion**

### **The Formation of Borders Communities in Sarawak-Kalimantan**

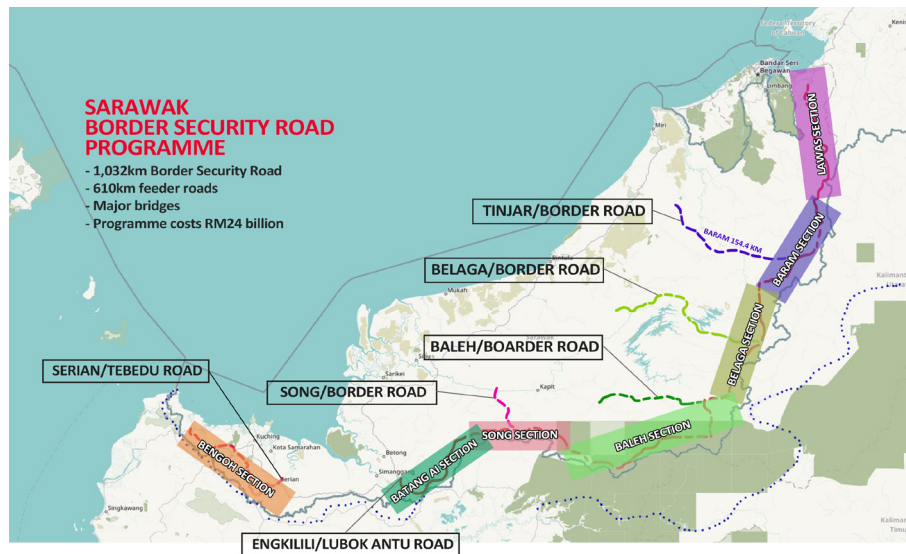
Before going through informal cross-border activities among the Sarawak-Kalimantan border communities, it is crucial to understand the history of border community formation along the Borneo (Sarawak & Sabah) border line with the Kalimantan border communities (Indonesia). Sarawak's state border community was formed following the political border-setting agreement signed to separate the framework of modern nation-states. Although the Treaty of Westphalia 1648 pioneered a nation-state's boundary and sovereignty for Nusantara, the English-Dutch Treaty of 1824 established the colonial territories between the English and Dutch. The Malay Archipelago was later chopped into blocks of autonomy with English-conquered Malaya, Straits Settlements, Borneo and Sarawak. At the same time, the Dutch conquered the entire Java, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Sumatra and other small islands along the Sunda Seas.<sup>17</sup>

Also, the determination of the international political borders that set the autonomy and dichotomy of territories between Sarawak and Kalimantan by default referred to a few conventions and agreements outlined below<sup>18</sup>:

- i. Delimitation Convention signed in London on June 20, 1891;
- ii. Delimitation Agreement signed in London on September 28, 1915; and
- iii. Delimitation Convention signed at The Hague on March 26, 1928.

As a result, an international border distance of 2,020 kilometers on the island of Borneo between the regions of Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah) and Indonesia (Kalimantan) was established. The border distance between Sarawak and Indonesia (Kalimantan) is 1,649 kilometers long, while for Sabah and Indonesia (Kalimantan) it is 371. Along this border are traditional settlement areas of the original population (Communities Lun Dayeh, Lun Bawang, Kelabit, Kayan, Iban, Bidayuh and Malay). However, following the boundary stated above those communities have been physically and mechanically separated from each other in the nuances of "nation-state geo-political boundaries." Map 1 shows several villages or traditional settlements of people along the border between Sarawak and Kalimantan organized from Bakelalan in the Northern part of Deep-Upper Sarawak (Orange) to the Southern part of Deep-Lower Sarawak (Orange) in the village of Teluk Melano.





Map 1: Sarawak-Kalimantan International Border Ranges

Source: Utusan Malaysia, Source: <https://www.theborneopost.com/2019/11/13/sarawak-kalimantan-border-security-road-network-now-crucial-says-masing/>.

As stated briefly at the beginning of the discussion. Historically, communities or groups of people living in border areas (currently) have sociologically existed in the physical environment of international borders for a long time before geo-political borders. In other words, the so-called border communities emerged earlier than borders and boundaries. An interview with Mr. Tadam<sup>19</sup>, a Lun Bawang ethnic, believes that the Lun Bawang community was already in the Ba'kelalan Highlands area as early as 1500. He further explained, "I was born in 1956 in Ba'kelalan, and I am the sixth generation of the Lun Bawang community. Even when I was born, Malaysia had not yet been formed." The Lun Bawang community in Ba'kelalan existed before the international border delimitation, separating the Lun Bawang community of Sarawak and the Lun Bawang community of East Kalimantan. These communities that live along the borders were families and relatives by bloodline and their kinship connection moves beyond the legal definition of border and boundary.

A similar story was also explained by Elap Garing<sup>20</sup>, the Head of the Kenyah Community who inhabits the geographical area of Long Singut, that the villages and settlements of the Kenyah community in the area had been developed by their ancestors for hundreds of years and they (the Kayan Community) are "Landlords" for the geographical environment of Long Singut which also extends to the border area of Indonesia. The existence of international borders has not only physically separated the ties of blood kinship among the Kenyah Community but has also given rise to the political autonomy of a new identity, 'Kenyah-Sarawak' and 'Kenyah-Kalimantan.' In other words, the geographical area of Long Singut (including the Long Singut area of Kalimantan), autonomously and culturally is the 'Land of Kenyah' also called the "Kenyah Border."

Furthermore, a similar emphasis on the existence and cultural nature of the Iban Community dwells in the Lubok Antu District of Sarawak, bordering the Kapuas District of Kalimantan. Lubok Antu, in the context of the geographical environment of Sarawak is the settlement area of the earliest Iban community in Sarawak. Lubok Antu was one of the early entry settlements of the Iban community from Tanah Kapuas in Central Kalimantan to Sarawak hundreds of years ago. From Lubok Antu, the Iban community spread to other areas in Sarawak, such as Kapit, Baram, Marudi, Saratok, Miri, Balai Ringin, Saribas, Selako, Debak, Lachau, Batang Ai and also Sibu. The movement of the Iban community from Sarawak (via Lubok Antu) to Kapuas (Kalimantan) still exists today.<sup>21</sup> The culture of

Bejalai (wander) and Bumi-Menua (Ancient Earth) is very strongly encapsulated in the socio-culture of the Iban community. An interview with Tuai Tawai<sup>22</sup> indicates that the context of Iban psycho-culture, through the concept of 'Ancient Earth' the land of Sarawak is the 'Iban Land' it transcends the meaning that the land of Kapuas in Kalimantan is the 'Original Land of Iban Birthplace.' The identity terms of 'Iban Sarawak' and 'Iban Kapuas' are by blood and brotherhood sharing the same land as one.

Meanwhile, in the geographical area bordering Serikin (in Sarawak's Bau District) and Entekong (in Kalimantan's Singkawang District), there is a slightly different context compared to the socio-cultural phenomenon in Ba'Kelalan, Long Singut and Lubok Antu. In Serikin, the community that has dominated this border area for hundreds of years is the Bidayuh community. At the same time, Entekong village is inhabited and overwhelmed by the Malay-Singkawang community. There is a significant cultural difference between these two communities. Despite differences according to the state records and fieldwork interviews, these two communities have never fought or been in conflict. The two communities understand and respect each other's social and political boundaries reciprocally even when resources for socio-economic environments overlap and they choose to function interdependently based on mutual needs.<sup>23</sup>

The bloody ethnic conflict that occurred in 1997 between the Maduras & Dayak (Iban) ethnic groups in Pontianak was a classic example that emphasised the pivotal of respect for social and political boundaries as well as the mutual need to retain harmonise with the ecosystem. Therefore, the relationships between the Bidayuh and Malay-Singkawang communities have been strong for over a hundred years. Also, it catalyses cohesion and tolerance between the two communities of different religions and cultures.<sup>24</sup>

Based on the socio-cultural descriptions made among the Sarawak-Kalimantan border communities, namely the Lun Bawang in Ba'Kelalan, Kenyah in Long Singut, Iban in Lubok Antu & Bidayuh in Serikin the sociological elements embodied in various socio-cultural namely the Kenyah Land or Kenyah Borders, Ancient-Earth, Iban Earth depict the mutual need among communities that shape the socio-economic activities, socio-political power relation through kinship and bloodline are essential to understand the behaviour of informal activities across and along Sarawak-Kalimantan border. The concept of existentialism within Acephalus society before constructing the nation-state is the basis for exploring everyday activities that connect communities on the Sarawak-Kalimantan border.<sup>25</sup>

### **Informal Economic Activities at the Border of Sarawak-Kalimantan: Between ancient existence and later existed**

Informal economic activities have been in place among border communities for centuries. Karulus of the Lun Bawang community says the phenomenon is familiar. The modern infrastructure of calculators, price tags and price control is inapplicable here. Also, In Ba'kelalan for example, most of the Lun Bawang community in this district is agrarian. Daily life is highly dependent on self-sufficient agricultural products. Even now, agriculture is 80 percent of the primary source of income for the survival of the Lun Bawang community. The survival concept of the Lun Bawang community is egalitarian and communitarian – equal roles and functions across genders and collective efforts and decisions for the greater good of the community.

The agricultural products, huma rice, black peppers and mountain salt are traditionally shared with the Lun Bawang families. The mountain salts are the main product of the Lun Bawang communities and become the primary source for barter trading among other communities at the borders. Mutual barter trading of agricultural products with other items like fur, leather, cooking gas



and vehicle petrol is among the things used daily.

Moreover, to strengthen the bloodline and blood ties as key to building community trust, marriages among similar tribes are encouraged in Sarawak or Kalimantan. This familial tie increases the mutual sharing of agriculture and other trading items because it circles among family members caring for their help to preserve the 'ancient-earth' culture and practice, nurturing the community's sense of belonging and defending their identity. The ever presence of 'ancient earth' with the sacred balance of cosmos harmony. Such credit revealed in their ecosystem is believed to preserve their environment, habitat and communities which are not keen on the modern international border dividing them as people of the 'ancient earth.' Also, they do not see modernity as the only avenue to progress as social beings. The cross-border marriages among the Lun Bawang community in Sarawak dan Kalimantan living at the border preserve informal activities rooted in trust among familial and kinships.

Among the Lun Bawang community, what is categorized as informal cross-border activity is preserving their ancient traditional practices for centuries since their existence in the acephalous state. The international border limits their traditional approach. The elderly Lun Bawang communities view informal cross-border activities as their cultural system and traditional values that go beyond borders. However, elements such as international borders, border control posts, cross-border documents and citizenship are negative values that threaten the daily existence of the traditional region of the Lun Bawang 'ancient earth' environment. Such traditional values and practices are carried out by the younger generation of Lun Bawang<sup>26</sup>.

The clash of traditional practices and the international border's rule and regulation creates bureaucratic conflict where orders are stipulated based on papers that challenge the everyday-defined activities of Lun Bawang land. Therefore, in our observations, the enforcement of the border rules implemented in the land of Lun Bawang recently takes into account the traditional values embedded in the social environment of the Lun Bawang community. The institutional requirement coercively forces the natural setting to change, but the commanding officers, primarily local, know the context and communities at the borders. They are willing to apply discretionary power which is deemed necessary as described by a commanding officer<sup>27</sup> of the Indonesian Cross-Border Control Post in Ba'kelalan,

...the international political rules cannot be maximally practiced in this district. If done maximally, it will create social tension among them, especially towards cross-border activities whether formal or informal. This international rule is because what is described as an informal or formal cross-border activity in the community is very vague. Therefore, as enforcement officers, we ensure that community activities and behaviors do not threaten the security and sovereignty between Indonesia and Malaysia. For me, delivering essential goods such as rice huma, black pepper and mountain salt between two border environments is an informal activity that has become familiar among communities with blood ties who need each other. So, the dependency between them is very high

The symbiotic relationship of Lun Bawang communities protecting the environment within their socio-economic spaces is inevitable. They only consume what is necessary from the agricultural commodities for self-sufficiency and sell the remaining. Commercial activities are minimal among the residents of this area. According to Captain Marlon, selling agricultural goods across borders through informal economic channels does not threaten security and sovereignty between countries. Community leaders have constantly assured local enforces that their activities are self-sustaining

among community members. Although trading through barter and the non-barter system does not follow the standard regulation which offers taxes for goods and revenues in return, the practices are recognized and acceptable by enforcement officers at the border. The transaction is small and the items are non-commercialized. Thus, the traditional system is permissible.

Nevertheless, the control mechanism for illegal activity is monitored jointly between the enforcement authorities and the local community. There is a form of proper understanding (although not officially created) between Malaysian-Indonesian law enforcers and among the border communities to regulate the well-being of the border from any form of illicit cross-border activities categorized as threats to the sovereignty and social being of Lun Bawang communities.

### **Borders communities on Nusantara Development**

The Lun Bawang community, whether located on the Malaysian or Indonesian border is aware of the new metropolis and the development of the new capital city of Indonesia also known as Nusantara, in east Kalimantan. According to En Paran, Indonesia's decision to introduce a new policy to relocate new development in east Kalimantan as a new capital city of Indonesia is a joy to many Kalimantan dwellers. The region is expected to have a new modern city that brings in many investors and later creates a prosperous economic spillover to other areas of Borneo. On the contrary, the Lun Bawang community shares similar expressions on Nusantara because the central focus is on Indonesia. Thus, a fair share of development to other regions in Borneo is unlikely. The Indonesians are taking charge of Nusantara and have little concern over inclusive growth on the periphery and semi-periphery areas and worst the border communities.

Like the Lun Bawang community, the Kenyah border community that lives in the Long Singut area also depends on agricultural activities as their primary source of income. The cultivation of Huma rice as their staple food is collectively done within the group apart from hunting and fishing. They also keep other domestic animals namely hens, pigs and cows, for poultry, meat and eggs. The income gains from agricultural activities are generally used for their sustenance and daily needs. The extra supply is sold to nearby markets such as Long Suman in the Indonesian region. The income earned from selling agricultural products is used to buy necessities such as sugar, milk and other lost food. They obtain other conditions from the town or village of Long Suman in Indonesia at a much lower price than essential goods on the Malaysian side.

For the Kenyah community that lives along the banks of the Ulu Balleh River from Kampung Singut in the north to the deep southern part of the river entering the Indonesian border in Kampung Suman, the communities are relatives with familial relationships. The marriages among family members of the same tribe are the practice and dwellers living from Kampung Singut to Kenyah village in Suman, Indonesia. The area is called the Kenyah area or the Kenyah district interchangeably. The cultural values, languages, dialects and way of life among Kenyah communities in these districts bordering Sarawak and Kalimantan are indistinguishable.

Thus, familial marriages between the Kenyah-Malaysian and Kenyah-Indonesian communities also known as the Kenyah-marriage, continue to flourish in the Kenyah district. Through this marriage, the social relations between Kenyah-Malaysia and Kenyah-Indonesia are bonded. For example, among Kenyah-Malaysians the family visits their Kenyah-Indonesian relatives in Long Suman village are done mutually and frequently. According to Elap Garing, trips to the Indonesian side are often made without using valid or official travel documents. The concept of the Kenyah district is well understood by international enforcement agencies at the border.

Sociologically in discussions about ethnicity and identity even for border communities, various concepts in sociology are applied to understand the phenomenon. The most basic is border culture, commonly known as the border way of life and the image of transnational border activity. The border-cultural image is evident among the Kenyah community in this region; the social interactions strengthened through Kenyah's marriage, making international borders less visible. Also the festivities, traditional values and animism beliefs further strengthen these borders communities even with boundaries that divide them. The shared cultural practices, customs, values and social life in the Kenyah community lead to a network of harmonious relationships among them.

The informant also admitted that visiting across the border is easier because strict laws and regulations do not control the border. Movement across the border does not require an international passport and there are no immigration posts on either side. According to Elap Garing, "...All this while, there has been no urgent problem with the mobility of immigration in the border areas especially among native communities along the border areas. However, a movement of entry and exit across the border remains recorded for security purposes."

Long Sungit is the closest access for the residents of Long Suman to get essential goods. Necessary items such as food and vehicle oil for personal use or sale are obtained from Long Sungit. According to Ardhana<sup>28</sup>, the price of goods from Tarakan and Nunukan is very high for communities of Long Suman because goods are transported to their area using airplanes. Therefore, the Long Suman community gets its supplies from Long Sungit. About 90 percent of goods sold in Long Suman come from Long Sungit.

In addition, Long Sungit is also a target place for marketing goods and services to the Long Suman community. Among the goods sold in the Long Sungit market are rattan and mountain salts. Labour services in agriculture and building construction are also available. Based on observations, the consistently high rates of trading and marketing activities at the border creates a new attraction centre in a remote area. A transportation service known as ojek is also available and popular among local communities around this area. The importance of Long Sungit and Long Suan to the Kenyah community is mentioned by other scholars in their studies including Karulus & Suadik, Ishikawa Wilson & Donna<sup>29</sup> and Langub, who stated that Long Sungit is an economic attraction for the Kenyah community to earn a living due to easy access via river and land which offering economic opportunities to market commodities, construction services and trade. In addition, the attractiveness of Ulu Baleh as a frontier for informal economic activities is the sustainability of border communities. For Elap Garing, what is more important than the financial attraction of everyday cross-border activities is the survival of the Kenyah community in the modern-day political requirement of border recognition between two independent nations.

Compared to Ba'kelalan and Long Sungit, informal cross-border activities in the Bidayuh village located in Kampung Serikin in Bau District are slightly different because the place was a center for governance and administration dating back to the thirteen centuries. Pekan Serikin is a border village whose majority population consists of the Bidayuh community. The Bidayuh community is the ethnic group that built this village 400 years ago. For centuries, this community has lived interdependently with the Malay-Sinkawang community that inhabits part of the West Kalimantan region specifically, the Sinkawang Pontianak district of West Kalimantan.

The border distance between Serikin Village and Sinkawang Village is approximately 10 km (Kilometers), separated by a border or boundary of sloping land compared to Ba'Kelalan and Long Sungit, which are highlands. From a historical perspective, the social relations between the Bidayuh and Malay-Sinkawang communities have been intertwined since the Mempawah Sultanate (1320-present), which dominated the administration and also organized trade from the land areas of Sinkawang (West Kalimantan), Sambas (West Kalimantan), Telok Melano (Sarawak) and Tanjong

Datu (Sarawak). The political dominance & glory of the Mempawah Sultanate in the 1500-1700 era is synonymous with the unity among its people, who are made up of various ethnic groups, namely Malays and Dayaks. The support and support given by the Dayak ethnic group (Iban & Bidayuh) to the Mempawah Sultanate is also closely related to the lines of the Mempawah Sultanate, which were initially built and led by the Bidayuh ethnic leadership before the emergence of Islamic influence in Mempawah.<sup>30</sup>

Due to the cultural memory and historical significance interconnected between the two communities, the relationship and social interaction between the Bidayuh and Malay-Sinkawang communities on the Serikin-Sinkawang border is marked by romanticism-historiography between two communities that support each other simultaneous needs in social and economic relations. This romanticism historiography is equal to diplomatic relations in the modern term involving two states. The value of needing and knowing each other capability and capacity complements the informal cross-border activities in Serikin-Sinkawang village.

Furthermore, the informal cross-border activities in Serikin-Sinkawang are very structured and organised. This situation exists due to indirect government intervention between the two countries to ensure economic progress. The two national communities can trade and do informal business activities every week on Saturdays and Sundays, at the Kampung Serikin business site. This weekly business has not only opened up economic space for both communities but has attracted tourists from the region to visit the business site for the past fifteen years, which is now popularly known to tourists as Pasar Serikin or Serikin market. For the last fifteen years, "Pasar Serikin" has emerged as a "frontier tourism product" for Sarawak. The overflowed tourists from the Peninsula, Europe and Singapore not only strengthen the informal economic activities of the "Pasar Serikin" border but also cause a spillover effect on ancillary tourism products near Kampung Serikin such as Gua Angin Bau, Kampung Lidah Tanah Batu Kawa and also the seafood-center of Telaga Air in Kampung Sibu Laut Matang. This positive development has positioned the informal economic activities of Pasar Serikin as a form of cross-border activity with a 'positive-sum-game' image and rebranded the border image of dark illicit into a beautiful exotic place for exploration on the Sarawak-Kalimantan border.

The products sold at Pasar Serikin differ entirely from the cross-border economic goods available in Ba'kelalan and Long Sungit. Hence, the orientation of economic activity also varies. The commodities in Pasar Serikin are diverse and can even complement the image market. At Pasar Serikin, visitors can obtain products of various economic natures. In general, products available in Pasar Serikin can be identified into five categories. First, agricultural products consisting of local vegetables, herbs, and fruits that are rare to find in traditional markets; second, local furniture products produced from high-quality local forest resources such as Sarawak rattan mats, bags, and hats; and the third is local traditional iron products such as Bidayuh knives and machete, Melayu-Singkawang's unique dagger and Singkawang's pottery; the fourth product is in the form of conventional costume and clothing and finally various home-living products for daily needs ranging from cooking aids to toiletries.

Serikin's informal economic activities receive mutual support from the Bidayuh and Melayu-Singkawang communities, which is the core pillar of Pasar Serikin. The market houses various products, with 75 percent monopolized by the Malay-Singkawang community. While the Bidayuh community dominates the business premises and spaces at Pasar Serikin, it offers business spaces to Malay-Singkawang merchants. The traders rent business spaces from Bidayuh community friends at a very reasonable price. This symbiotic relationship has indirectly created a "win-win" situation between the two communities in a spirit called mutual need.

### Considering The Sociological Elements

The analysis of the three Sarawak-Kalimantan border communities reveals the importance of considering their historical and sociocultural context when studying borderlands. These communities' historical experiences not only shape their current socioeconomic practices but also influence their engagement with the state and its regulatory frameworks. Any research focused on these communities must therefore incorporate a broader temporal lens, acknowledging that their contemporary practices are deeply intertwined with their past and evolving relationships with neighboring regions and authorities.

In particular, when examining informal economic activities across the Sarawak-Kalimantan border, it becomes apparent that traditional sociological frameworks, such as Peter Chalk's "grey area phenomenon," which focuses on illegal activities arising from ambiguous state authority, may be inadequate or oversimplified for this context. While Chalk's model is useful for understanding areas where governance structures are weak and where illicit activities thrive, it assumes a binary division between what is legal and illegal, often overlooking the complexities of border economies in communities that are neither fully incorporated into state control nor operating in an entirely illicit sphere.

The "grey area" framework's focus on the illicit and illegitimate dimensions of border activities may obscure the important social functions that informal economic exchanges serve in these communities. The everyday economic actions across the Sarawak-Kalimantan border reflect a much more nuanced reality, where informal exchanges play a crucial role in ensuring survival, fostering familial ties, and maintaining social trust. In fact, these activities are embedded within the fabric of local social life, transcending simple economic transactions and involving a deeper cultural and social logic. These exchanges often serve as vehicles for mutual support, creating networks of reciprocity that are vital for community resilience.

To better understand these dynamics, the concepts of 'Previously Existed' and 'Later Existence' offer a more critical and adaptive framework for analyzing the socio-political and socio-economic activities of the Sarawak-Kalimantan border communities. The 'Previously Existed' concept acknowledges the persistence of historical patterns and customs, which have evolved over generations and formed the basis for local economic practices. These practices often existed long before state regulation, and despite the external pressures of modern governance, they remain central to community life. These traditional forms of exchange have an inherent legitimacy that is not necessarily aligned with state-centric legal frameworks.

The 'Later Existence' concept, on the other hand, highlights how these border communities adapt to contemporary socio-political shifts. The borderland itself is a space of fluidity—caught between the forces of globalization, state regulation, and local survival strategies. However, while these communities often navigate the legal and institutional structures imposed upon them, the state itself has been slow to integrate them into formal economic systems. The tension between the "traditional" and the "modern" becomes crucial here, with border communities continually redefining their roles in an increasingly globalized economy while resisting or selectively engaging with the structures of the nation-state.

Critically, it is necessary to address the potential risks of relying too heavily on the 'Previously Existed' and 'Later Existence' framework without considering the external pressures these communities face. For instance, the historical practices of barter and informal exchanges have been significantly disrupted by contemporary issues such as land grabbing, environmental degradation, and the imposition of national borders that do not reflect the realities of local populations. Additionally, while informal economies provide a vital safety net, they are also vulnerable to exploitation, as the



lack of regulation can sometimes lead to precarious livelihoods or the marginalization of certain subgroups within the border communities.

Moreover, while informal economies at the border may not always involve illicit goods such as narcotics or arms, they can still contribute to what might be called “informal governance.” This term reflects how these communities often rely on alternative forms of social control and dispute resolution, which may fall outside the purview of the formal legal system. This informal governance can offer social cohesion but also carry risks, as it may reinforce local power imbalances and create challenges for broader state-led efforts at development and stability.

Therefore, the study of informal economies in border regions must move beyond dichotomous legal definitions and engage critically with the lived realities of borderland communities. In doing so, scholars can offer a more nuanced understanding of how these communities navigate complex socio-political environments. Informal economic practices, when seen through the lens of historical continuity and adaptation, reveal a complex interplay between local traditions and global forces, showing the resilience and adaptability of these communities in the face of changing political, economic, and environmental conditions.

As stated at the beginning of the discussion, the concept of ‘previously existed’ which consists of sociological history and cultural elements is best explained by the actual border communities that inhabit the Sarawak-Kalimantan border areas. The archipelago’s capital, which developed in a modern-capitalist orientation is the ‘later existence’ that influences the activities and lives of border communities that still believe in the ‘ancient earth’ as their sacred land to be protected and preserved. In Elap Garing’s words,

...the archipelago will become a symbol of a complex and modern metropolis in the Borneo archipelago. The impact is very comprehensive to all communities in Borneo, including communities living in border areas. Whether Nusantara will give us a profit or vice versa depends on the orientation and time-space. What is important is that we (Kenyah) as a border community need to be alert so that whatever developments are happening around us and the social environment nearby do not threaten the survival of our lives as a border community that has existed for a long time...

## Conclusion

The socio-economic landscape of the Sarawak-Kalimantan border communities is best understood through a lens that intertwines historical and cultural elements with contemporary realities. This study reveals that cross-border informal economic activities are not simply responses to economic necessity; they are deeply embedded in the rich tapestry of historical narratives and cultural identities that define these communities.

The concept of “previously existed” versus “later existence” provides a theoretical framework to analyse how these communities navigate their identities amid modern developments, such as the relocation of Indonesia’s capital to Nusantara. This framework allows us to appreciate the tension between the enduring significance of the “ancient earth” revered by local populations, and the encroaching modern capitalist influences that threaten to disrupt their traditional ways of life. Elap Garing’s reflections illuminate this duality, emphasizing the need for vigilance among border communities to safeguard their heritage against rapid urbanization and economic transformation.

Empirically, ethnographic observations of the Lun Bawang, Kenyah, and Bidayuh communities illustrate how these historical and cultural contexts shape their informal economies. Rather than merely existing in a grey area between legality and illegality, these activities foster

symbiotic relationships characterized by mutual support and collective resilience. The strong kinship ties, communal values and shared rituals among these groups serve as social capital that sustains their economic practices and reinforces their identity even in the face of bureaucratic challenges.

Moreover, the interplay between the local and the global within these border communities highlights the importance of recognizing them as dynamic agents in a complex socio-political landscape. Recent scholarship suggests that viewing borders as sites of interaction and exchange rather than mere lines of division enhances our understanding of how communities adapt to and resist external pressures.

In conclusion, integrating theoretical insights with empirical findings enriches our comprehension of border communities, urging policymakers and scholars to consider these regions' vital cultural continuity and adaptation spaces. Future development initiatives must acknowledge and actively engage with these communities' historical and cultural contexts, ensuring that their voices and needs are central to the discourse around cross-border interactions. This approach fosters inclusive economic growth and honours these communities' legacy as custodians of their cultural heritage in an ever-evolving landscape.

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## Notes

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