

Sociocultural Perspective Among the Kiput of Baram: a Study of Kuala Tutoh and Benawa Communities

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Abstrak

The Kiput of northern Sarawak, a small yet culturally significant indigenous group of about 450 people, remains understudied. Living in two settlements, Kuala Tutoh (mainly Christian) and Kampung Benawa (mainly Muslim), they navigate ethnic identity maintenance amid assimilation pressures and internal religious diversity. Using community-based ethnography, which incorporates participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival materials, this study employs thematic analysis with member checking to ensure community-grounded interpretations. Findings show that Kiput identity is sustained through shared historical memory, linguistic distinctiveness, and material culture, while religious affiliation is the primary organising principle shaping settlement patterns, livelihoods, and ritual life. Despite religious divergence, ethnic identification remains cohesive through enduring kinship ties. Younger members express reduced engagement with traditional markers yet selectively sustain aspects of their heritage. Cultural continuity persists alongside adaptive strategies, although structural factors such as state schooling, market pressures, and limited economic opportunities constrain intergenerational transmission, especially of the Kiput language. The study recommends strengthening indigenous land rights, reforming language education, supporting community-led heritage initiatives, and ensuring participatory development planning. The Kiput case reflects broader challenges faced by minority indigenous groups in Borneo as national development transforms ancestral landscapes and subsistence systems.

Keywords: Kiput; Indigenous Communities; Sarawak; Ethnic Identity; Religious Diversity

Abstrak

Suku Kiput di Sarawak utara, sebuah kelompok masyarakat adat yang kecil namun signifikan secara budaya dengan jumlah sekitar 450 orang, masih kurang diteliti. Tinggal di dua pemukiman, Kuala Tutoh (sebagian besar Kristen) dan Kampung Benawa (sebagian besar Muslim), mereka berupaya mempertahankan identitas etnis di tengah tekanan asimilasi dan keragaman agama internal. Menggunakan etnografi berbasis komunitas, yang menggabungkan observasi partisipan, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan materi arsip, studi ini menggunakan analisis tematik dengan pengecekan anggota untuk memastikan interpretasi yang berlandaskan komunitas. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa identitas Kiput dipertahankan melalui memori sejarah bersama, kekhasan linguistik, dan budaya material, sementara afiliasi agama adalah prinsip pengorganisasian utama yang membentuk pola permukiman, mata pencaharian, dan kehidupan ritual. Terlepas dari perbedaan agama, identifikasi etnis tetap kohesif melalui ikatan kekerabatan

yang langgeng. Anggota yang lebih muda menunjukkan keterlibatan yang berkurang dengan penanda tradisional namun secara selektif mempertahankan aspek-aspek warisan mereka. Kontinuitas budaya tetap ada bersamaan dengan strategi adaptif, meskipun faktor struktural seperti pendidikan negeri, tekanan pasar, dan peluang ekonomi yang terbatas membatasi transmisi antar generasi, terutama bahasa Kiput. Studi ini merekomendasikan penguatan hak atas tanah masyarakat adat, reformasi pendidikan bahasa, dukungan terhadap inisiatif pelestarian warisan budaya yang dipimpin masyarakat, dan memastikan perencanaan pembangunan partisipatif. Kasus Kiput mencerminkan tantangan yang lebih luas yang dihadapi oleh kelompok minoritas masyarakat adat di Kalimantan seiring dengan transformasi lanskap leluhur dan sistem mata pencaharian melalui pembangunan nasional.

Kata Kunci: Kiput; Masyarakat Adat; Sarawak; Identitas Etnis; Keragaman Agama



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Introduction

The island of Borneo is home to some of the world's most linguistically and culturally diverse Indigenous populations (Wan et al., 2015), yet many smaller communities remain underdocumented in contemporary scholarship. Among these groups are the Kiput of northern Sarawak, a numerically small yet culturally significant indigenous people whose sociocultural trajectories have been largely overshadowed by research on larger Orang Ulu communities (Horn, 2015). Existing scholarship on the Kiput is dominated by fragmentary linguistic descriptions and generalised ethnographic references, leaving their present-day sociocultural organisation, identity practices, and lived experiences underexplored. This absence of systematic and community-grounded research unclear how the Kiput negotiate religious diversity, intergenerational change, state development interventions, and shifting livelihood patterns, factors that increasingly shape indigenous communities across Borneo.

The Kiput are today primarily distributed across two settlements: Kuala Tutoh (predominantly Christian) and Kampung Benawa (predominantly Muslim). These contrasting religious orientations have produced distinct settlement layouts, ritual calendars, and patterns of social organisation. These internal differences offer a valuable opportunity to examine how religious plurality intersects with ethnic identity maintenance within a single indigenous group. At the same time, broader structural pressures, including formal schooling, market integration, and rural-urban migration, have contributed to the decline in the intergenerational transmission of Kiput language and cultural knowledge. Similar patterns of language decline have been documented among other indigenous groups in Borneo, where intergenerational transmission weakens due to urbanisation and educational policies favouring dominant languages (Zulfadzlee & Chuchu, 2025)

This study addresses the significant research gap by offering a systematic ethnographic description of the Kiput's contemporary sociocultural landscape, focusing on how identity, religion, and cultural continuity are negotiated in Kuala Tutoh and Benawa. By grounding the analysis in community perspectives and everyday lived realities, the study provides insight into the wider challenges faced

by minority Indigenous groups in Sarawak as they navigate cultural survival within rapidly transforming social and economic environments.

Contemporary research has established that minority indigenous communities throughout Southeast Asia experience accelerated patterns of linguistic attrition, cultural erosion and socioeconomic marginalisation (Martin, 2005; *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 2025). Sociolinguistic research on related languages, particularly Belait and Tutong, spoken in neighbouring Brunei, has documented how dominant language regimes, educational policies prioritising metropolitan languages, and shifting economic opportunities substantially diminish the intergenerational transmission of minority languages (Campbell & Christian, 2005). The Kiput language, situated within the Berawan-Lower Baram branch of the Austronesian language family, exhibits 74% lexical similarity with Belait, representing the highest degree of linguistic relatedness recorded in the region (Blust, 2003). Despite this linguistic significance and the language's earlier classification as the native speech of approximately 450 speakers confined to a single longhouse complex (Blust, 2003), current speaker populations and language vitality remain inadequately documented. Regional research trajectories suggest that patterns of language shift are observable amongst related ethnic groups. The Belait community's experience with transnational migration has resulted in increased pressure to maintain their language. As diaspora communities adapt to new linguistic environments, they strive to preserve their heritage language (Damit & Zulkiflee, 2025). This situation is further complicated by the accelerated urban migration of youth, educational pathways that are conducted entirely in Malay and English, and the diminishing functional domains for the use of minority languages (Lee & Wang, 2018). These factors almost certainly impact the Kiput speech communities; however, a systematic investigation into these issues is still lacking.

Beyond linguistic dimensions, the Kiput exemplify broader dynamics reshaping indigenous societies across Borneo. Contemporary literature examining Orang Ulu communities documents profound transformations in settlement patterns, livelihood strategies, family structures and cultural identity consequent upon rural-urban migration, infrastructure development and resource extraction (King et al., 2017). Studies of Iban rural-urban migration reveal how the outmigration of younger generations, increased economic dependence on formal employment sectors, and declining agricultural participation reshape longhouse social cohesion and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Soda, 2001). Religious conversion processes, similarly documented among diverse Borneo communities, constitute profound sociocultural reorientations that affect residential arrangements, ritual calendars, educational priorities, and community governance structures (Thambiah, 2007; Dentan et al., 2006). The Kiput experience, with Muslim and Christian communities maintaining divergent settlement arrangements and potentially differential engagement with traditional cultural practices, offers an illuminating case study of how religious plurality intersects with ethnic identity maintenance and community cohesion.

The scholarly literature on indigenous livelihoods in Baram emphasises historical subsistence economies centred on swidden rice cultivation, supplemented by hunting, fishing, and gathering forest products (EnviroLab Asia, 2019). Contemporary research documents substantial livelihood transformations

consequent upon land conversion to industrial agriculture, logging concessions, educational advancements that enable formal sector employment, and state-sponsored development initiatives (PLOS ONE, 2020). Economic aspirations articulated by Baram communities, who seek infrastructure improvements (roads, schools, clinics, electricity, etc.) without relinquishing their customary land rights or compromising traditional subsistence access (EnviroLab Asia, 2019), reflect complex negotiations between development aspirations and cultural sustainability. Yet documentation of how specific minority communities, particularly the numerically small Kiput, navigate these economic transformations remains underdeveloped. Furthermore, recent scholarship emphasises indigenous rights mobilisation around land claims and environmental conservation, exemplified by the Baram Peace Park initiative and Upper Baram Forest Area project (Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 2019). These initiatives represent community-led efforts that integrate cultural preservation, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable livelihood development. The Kiput's participation in or positioning towards such collective action remains largely unexamined.

Indigenous material culture, encompassing beadwork, woven textiles, woodcarving, and craft production, functions as a repository of cosmological knowledge, genealogical information, and cultural identity (McHattie & Teo Boon Ting, 2024). Emerging research conceptualises such practices as "visual languages" that encode historical narratives and spiritual beliefs, rather than merely aesthetic endeavours. For Orang Ulu communities broadly, traditional craft practices face simultaneous pressures from market commodification, labour-intensive production requirements, and educational systems that privilege formal over embodied knowledge transmission identity (McHattie & Teo Boon Ting, 2024). The maintenance, adaptation, or transformation of Kiput material culture practices, and the extent to which such practices sustain cultural resilience amid modernisation pressures, requires investigation within specific community contexts rather than through generalised regional frameworks.

Despite the manifest sociocultural significance of the Kiput and the scholarly imperative to document the circumstances of minority communities before potential cultural erasure, a comprehensive ethnographic investigation addressing contemporary Kiput sociocultural dynamics remains absent from the academic literature. The existing knowledge base comprises fragmentary linguistic descriptions (Blust, 2003), historical mission records, general Orang Ulu ethnographies, within which Kiput receive minimal specification (King et al., 2017), and administrative reports that emphasise demographic classification rather than cultural analysis. This research lacuna obscures our understanding of how Kiput communities navigate contemporary challenges, maintain their cultural identity, organise social relationships, and envision their futures amid broader regional transformations. The absence of detailed community-based research precludes informed policy discussions regarding education, language revitalisation, cultural heritage preservation and sustainable development initiatives tailored to Kiput-specific circumstances and aspirations.

The present investigation addresses this research gap through a community-based ethnographic study examining sociocultural perspectives and practices amongst Kiput communities in Kuala Tutoh and Benawa. The study seeks to

investigate: (1) how Kiput communities conceptualise and maintain ethnic identity amidst pressures towards assimilation and modernisation, and (2) the sociocultural dimensions and implications of religious diversity within Kiput society. Through detailed ethnographic fieldwork, which encompasses participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and archival research, the study generates community-grounded knowledge that illuminates Kiput's sociocultural circumstances while contributing to a broader anthropological understanding of minority indigenous communities navigating post-colonial Southeast Asia (Allred et al., 2023). The research prioritises Kiput community agency, reflexivity and local epistemologies rather than imposing externally derived analytical frameworks. Findings are anticipated to inform culturally appropriate development initiatives, language and heritage preservation programmes and policy discussions concerning indigenous rights and land tenure security within Sarawak's evolving political economy.

Existing research on Bornean indigenous communities highlights the accelerating pressures of language shift, rural–urban migration, livelihood transformation, and religious conversion; however, much of this literature focuses on larger groups, such as the Iban, Kayan, and Kenyah (King, 2016). Studies of minority languages in Brunei and Sarawak demonstrate that schooling, economic mobility, and urbanisation undermine intergenerational transmission (Tupas & Sercombe, 2014), patterns likely shared by the Kiput but not yet systematically examined. Similarly, ethnographies of Orang Ulu communities undergoing conversion or resettlement demonstrate how religion reshapes social organisation, ritual life, and kinship without necessarily dissolving ethnic identity (Dentan et al., 2006). Meanwhile, recent work on material culture emphasises its role as a repository of historical knowledge and cultural resilience.

Method

This research employed a community-based ethnographic approach to document current sociocultural practices, understandings of identity, and everyday experiences among the Kiput communities in Kuala Tutoh and Kampung Benawa. Fieldwork was conducted through extended visits to both sites, during which the researcher lived within the communities, participated in daily activities, and engaged directly with households, community leaders, and local organisations. This approach enabled sustained immersion and facilitated a deeper understanding of how cultural practices, religious expressions, and social relationships are enacted in everyday settings (Brennan & Schulze, 2004).

Participant observation formed the core method. Daily routines, settlement interactions, religious events, craft production activities, agricultural work, and communal gatherings were observed to capture the rhythms of life in both Christian and Muslim Kiput communities. Attention was given to contrasting settlement patterns, social spaces, intergenerational interactions, and the presence or absence of traditional practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Kiput men and women across a range of ages. Participants were selected through community recommendations and purposive sampling to ensure representation from household heads, elders, youth, religious leaders, and craft practitioners. Interviews explored themes such as ethnic identity, religious practices, language use, perceived

cultural changes, aspirations for education and livelihood, and reflections on community futures. Conversations were conducted in Kiput, Sarawak Malay, or Standard Malay, depending on the participants' preferences.

Archival and documentary materials, including mission records, administrative documents, and locally produced materials, supplemented the ethnographic data by providing historical context (Gracy, 2004) and tracing broader patterns of cultural transformation in the Baram region. The analysis involved organising field observations and interview insights thematically, focusing on recurring patterns across the two research sites. Rather than using formal coding software, themes were developed through repeated reading, comparison, and interpretation of fieldnotes and interview transcripts (Tessier, 2012). Preliminary interpretations were discussed informally with community members to ensure that the analysis reflected local perspectives and did not impose inappropriate external assumptions.

Results and Discussion

The ethnographic investigation revealed that contemporary Kiput communities maintain distinctive ethnic identities whilst occupying complex positions within Sarawak's multiethnic and multireligious landscape. Analysis of sociocultural data across both research sites identified several significant themes: ethnic identity maintenance amidst pressures of assimilation; religious diversity as a structuring principle of community organisation; intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge; and contemporary aspirations for development and cultural continuity. Zulfadzlee and Chuchu (2025) found that community-based revitalization programs and digital initiatives emerged as crucial interventions for endangered languages in Brunei, a strategy that could benefit the Kiput communities.

Kiput Community and Language

The Kiput constitute a small indigenous ethnic group concentrated within the Baram River Basin in northern Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. Approximately 450 Kiput individuals resided in the region, representing one of Sarawak's smallest indigenous populations (Blust, 2002). Historically, the Kiput organised themselves around longhouse settlements that functioned as fundamental social, economic, and ritual units within indigenous Bornean societies. Traditional Kiput settlement patterns reflected adaptive strategies developed over centuries of inhabitation within tropical forest environments, with longhouses positioned to facilitate agricultural production, hunting, fishing, and gathering of forest products (King et al., 2017). Contemporary Kiput settlement organisation, however, reflects significant differentiation according to religious affiliation. In Kuala Tutoh, predominantly Christian Kiput continue to inhabit traditional longhouse structures that maintain continuity with ancestral settlement patterns, while incorporating contemporary modifications that respond to changing household composition and livelihood requirements. These longhouses typically accommodate multiple related families within a single structure, maintaining communal spaces for social interaction and collective decision-making (Riget & Campbell, 2020). The Christian Kiput community in Kuala Tutoh maintains stronger associations with traditional

material culture practices, including beadwork, textile weaving, and woodcarving, which function as repositories of cosmological knowledge and expressions of ethnic identity (McHattie & Teo Boon Ting, 2024).

In contrast, Kampung Benawa, predominantly inhabited by Muslim Kiput, reflects residential arrangements centred on individual family houses organised within a village settlement pattern. This distinction in settlement form correlates with religious conversion processes that have substantially restructured Kiput social organisation. Islamic religious practices and values have influenced residential architecture, family composition arrangements, and communal decision-making structures, reflecting broader patterns documented among other Borneo communities undergoing religious conversion (Thambiah, 2007; Dentan et al., 2006). Despite these religious distinctions, both communities maintain self-identification as Kiput, suggesting that ethnic identity persists despite religious differentiation and associated sociocultural reorganisation.

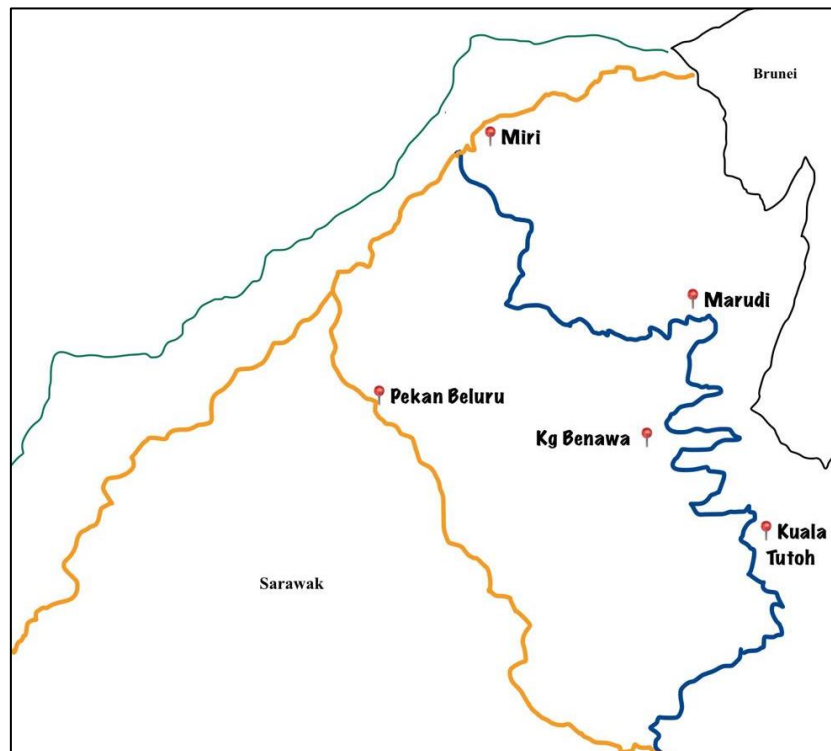


Figure 1. The location of Kg Benawa and Kuala Tutoh in Baram River
Source: Research Data, 2025

The Kiput language, situated within the Berawan-Lower Baram branch of the Austronesian language family, exhibits 74% lexical similarity with Belait, representing the highest degree of linguistic relatedness recorded in the region (Blust, 2003). This linguistic relationship positions Kiput within a broader cluster of closely related minority languages whose speakers face comparable pressures towards linguistic attrition and language shift (Riget & Campbell, 2020). Earlier linguistic documentation classified Kiput as the native speech of approximately 450 speakers confined to a single longhouse complex (Blust, 2003), though current

speaker populations and language vitality remain inadequately documented. Preliminary observations suggest that linguistic diversity characterises contemporary Kiput communities, with individuals maintaining variable competence in Kiput, Sarawak Malay, Standard Malay, English, and religious languages (Arabic for Muslim Kiput populations), reflecting broader patterns of multilingualism observable across Southeast Asian indigenous communities (Martin, 2005).

The intergenerational transmission of the Kiput language appears to have weakened substantially, with younger generation members, particularly those engaged in formal education or urban employment, demonstrating reduced productive competence in Kiput while maintaining a passive understanding of parental speech identity (McHattie & Teo Boon Ting, 2024). Educational trajectories conducted entirely in Malay and English, combined with reduced functional domains for Kiput language use in economically valued domains such as commerce, government, and formal employment, mirror patterns of language shift documented among related indigenous communities (Lee & Wang, 2018). The Kiput language's current endangerment status, though formally unclassified in international language vitality assessments, constitutes a significant concern warranting urgent documentation and community-based revitalisation initiatives analogous to those undertaken for related Borneo languages (Riget & Campbell, 2020).

Ethnic Identity and Cultural Resilience

Despite occupying a marginal position within Sarawak's ethnic hierarchies, with limited political representation and economic resources relative to numerically larger indigenous groups, Kiput communities articulated strong, multifaceted understandings of ethnic identity rooted in shared historical narratives, linguistic distinctiveness, and material culture practices. Ethnic identity, as conceptualised by research participants, encompassed recognition of shared ancestry and descent from 'the earlier tribe,' adherence to particular kinship obligations and reciprocal relationships, and engagement with distinctive material culture practices including beadwork, textile weaving, and traditional craft production.

Intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity occurred through multiple mechanisms (Nauck, 2001). Household members engaged in daily language use, though multilingual communication patterns characterised contemporary domestic contexts. Ritual observances, including both Christian and Islamic religious practices, as well as residual traditional observances, served as contexts in which ethnic identity was affirmed and reproduced. Material culture production, particularly the creation of beadwork and textiles following traditional designs and techniques, served both as economic activity and as a symbolic practice affirming ethnic identity and spiritual connections. Participation in community decision-making forums, settlement governance structures, and collective labour activities reinforced ethnic solidarity and communal identity.



Figure 2. Example of Kiput community beadwork from Kuala Tutoh
Source: Research Data, 2025

However, ethnographic observation indicated that younger generation members (ages 15–30) demonstrated weakened engagement with ethnic identity markers relative to older community members. Limited competence in the Kiput language, reduced participation in traditional craft production, and expressed aspirations for educational advancement and urban employment suggested that contemporary youth navigated their ethnic identity in complex and contested ways. Rather than simply rejecting Kiput identity, younger generation members appeared to be negotiating selective engagement with ethnic markers whilst simultaneously constructing identities as educated, modern subjects positioned for participation in Sarawak's formal economy. This pattern aligns with broader research that documents how indigenous youth in Southeast Asia construct hybrid identities, incorporating both ethnic heritage connections and aspirations for contemporary modernity (King, 2016).

Religious Diversity and Community Organisation

The research revealed that religious affiliation constituted perhaps the most significant principle structuring contemporary Kiput community organisation, generating morphologically distinct settlements and influencing livelihood strategies, household composition, and ritual calendars. The Christian Kiput community in Kuala Tutoh maintained traditional longhouse structures that accommodated multiple extended family groups within a single architectural complex. Religious practice centred on Sunday worship services conducted in the Kiput language, with Christian hymns and liturgy representing significant contexts for Kiput language use. Christian religious calendars incorporated elements of traditional festive occasions, creating syncretic observances blending Christian theology with indigenous cultural elements.



Figure 3. Longhouse structures of the Kiput community in Kuala Tutoh
Source: Research Data, 2025

The Muslim Kiput community in Benawa inhabited individual family houses organised within a village settlement pattern and engaged in daily Islamic prayer practices conducted in Arabic, supplemented by Qur'anic study groups and religious instruction for younger community members. Islamic religious calendars, including Ramadan observances and Eid celebrations, structured community ritual life and household economic activities. Gender relations within Muslim Kiput households appeared to reflect Islamic interpretations of gender roles, with women's work patterns and household responsibilities manifesting distinctive characteristics relative to Christian Kiput communities. However, women in both communities maintained significant responsibilities for agricultural production, craft creation, and managing household finances.



Figure 4. Individual houses of Kiput community in Kg Benawa
Source: Research Data, 2025

Analytically, this suggests that religion acts as a differentiating internal boundary but not a dividing ethnic boundary. It shapes how Kiput people organise social life, but it does not determine who counts as Kiput. Such patterns resonate with theoretical models of “plural identities” in Indigenous societies where ethnic and religious identities overlap without collapsing into a single hierarchy. The Kiput case, therefore, illustrates how minority groups integrate world religions while maintaining ethnic cohesion.

Cultural Continuity and Adaptation

Ethnographic observation revealed that contemporary Kiput communities engaged in selective adaptation and maintenance of cultural practices rather than wholesale abandonment of tradition in favour of modernity. Material culture practices, religious observances, kinship structures, and settlement organisation demonstrated combinations of continuity with ancestral patterns alongside adaptive modifications responding to contemporary circumstances. This pattern aligns with anthropological conceptualisations of culture as a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon undergoing continuous transformation rather than constituting fixed, unchanging systems (Allred et al., 2023).

Traditional beadwork and textile production persisted in both communities, particularly among women and older generations, although the intensity of production and participation in the market varied. Traditional knowledge regarding medicinal plants, forest ecology, and agricultural techniques persisted but appeared to be less actively transmitted to younger generations compared to formal educational content. Traditional governance structures, which include authority held by settlement leaders and consensus-based decision-making forums, coexist with state administrative structures. This creates hybrid governance arrangements that reflect both indigenous and state institutional forms.

Religious conversion has led to significant transformations in spiritual beliefs and ritual practices; yet, research has revealed the persistence of certain pre-conversion cosmological elements that are integrated into Christian and Islamic frameworks. For example, recognition of spiritual dangers and protective practices, whilst now conceptualised within Christian or Islamic theological frameworks, continued to structure community understandings of misfortune and health management. This syncretic integration of indigenous and world religious elements represented adaptive strategies whereby communities modified religious affiliations whilst maintaining cultural continuities (Dentan et al., 2006).

The research findings carry significant implications for policy and development initiatives affecting Kiput communities. First, recognition of Kiput indigenous land rights constitutes an essential foundation for sustainable cultural and economic development, enabling communities to maintain access to their ancestral territories and natural resource bases, which sustain traditional subsistence practices and contemporary livelihood diversification. Second, educational and language policy reforms prioritising minority language documentation, maintenance, and school-based instruction could substantially enhance language vitality and intergenerational transmission. Third, community-led cultural heritage preservation initiatives, supported through institutional partnerships and adequate funding mechanisms, could enable systematic documentation of material culture knowledge and traditional ecological practices. Fourth, development initiatives affecting Kiput communities should incorporate community participation in planning and implementation processes, respecting community agency and self-determination principles rather than imposing externally derived development models.

This ethnographic investigation of Kiput communities in Kuala Tutoh and Benawa revealed that contemporary Kiput maintain distinctive ethnic identities and social organisations despite occupying marginalised positions within Sarawak's multiethnic landscape and confronting pressures towards cultural assimilation and language shift. Religious affiliation emerged as a significant principle structuring settlement organisation (Murdock & Wilson, 1972), livelihood strategies, and community governance, though religious diversity did not fundamentally undermine Kiput ethnic identification or kinship recognition across religious boundaries. Kiput communities navigate complex negotiations between maintaining cultural heritage and engaging with contemporary modernity, pursuing educational advancement and economic development opportunities while simultaneously seeking to preserve distinctive cultural practices, languages, and social organisations. However, various structural forces, such as state educational policies, market-driven livelihood incentives, and limited economic opportunities in home territories, create significant pressures that undermine the intergenerational transmission of culture, especially regarding the Kiput language and traditional knowledge systems.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Kiput communities of Kuala Tutoh and Benawa continue to maintain a distinct ethnic identity, despite the significant social, economic, and religious transformations shaping contemporary life in the Baram

region. While differences in religious affiliation have produced contrasting settlement forms and ritual practices, they have not fractured the broader sense of shared ancestry, kinship and cultural belonging that unites Kiput people across both communities. At the same time, pressures from state education systems, expanding economies and limited local livelihood opportunities have begun to weaken intergenerational transmission of language and traditional knowledge, placing key elements of Kiput heritage at risk. Yet the communities also demonstrate resilience through adaptive cultural practices, selective continuity, and a growing desire to engage with development on their own terms. Ensuring the long-term vitality of Kiput cultural identity requires sustained collaboration, locally driven initiatives, and policies that recognise indigenous land rights, support language maintenance, and strengthen community agency. The Kiput case thus offers valuable insight into the broader challenges facing minority indigenous groups in Southeast Asia as they negotiate cultural survival, modern aspirations and shifting sociopolitical landscapes.

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