

THE PUNAN PEOPLE OF BATU BENAU SAJAU: BETWEEN HUNTER-GATHERER MOBILITY AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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Abstract *This paper examines whether the Punan people of Batu Benau Sajau in North Kalimantan can be seen as a hunter-gatherer society in the contemporary context. Historically, the Punan people were known as forest nomads who relied on hunting, gathering, and seasonal mobility for their livelihoods. However, with state expansion, market penetration, and the entry of corporate concessions, this lifestyle has undergone a significant transformation. The Punan people of Batu Benau Sajau continue to maintain hunter-gatherer characteristics, including a forest-based subsistence system, seasonal mobility, and an egalitarian social structure. Their spatial cosmology also demonstrates a deep attachment to the forest landscape, which serves as the basis not only for their livelihood but also for their cultural identity. They cannot be viewed as "pure" hunter-gatherers, but rather as a society that articulates a hunter-gatherer identity within the context of contemporary political-ecological contestation. This study highlights the importance of understanding hunter-gatherers as a spectrum of adaptations, thereby strengthening the basis for recognizing their customary rights within the framework of Indonesian forestry policy.*

Keyword:

Punan Batu, hunter-gatherer, customary forest, mobility, resilience

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1. Introduction

The debate over categorizing hunter-gatherer societies has long been a key theme in anthropology. From the beginning, anthropologists viewed these groups as representing the "original way of life" of humans that predates agriculture (Lee & DeVore, 1968). However, emerging research has shown that the hunter-gatherer label is not a static category, but rather an analytical construct often influenced by evolutionist ideology and the romanticization of

egalitarianism (Ingold, 2000; Barnard, 2004). Several studies emphasize that hunter-gatherer societies are not entirely isolated but rather constantly interact with groups of cultivators, farmers, traders, and even the state, often positioning themselves within asymmetrical networks of relationships (Headland & Reid, 1989; Schrire, 2009). This debate is also illustrated by Kaskija (2017), who proposes that hunter-gatherers are diverse, dynamic, and unique, thus defying a universal model. New approaches encourage contextual studies that view them as part of broader social, economic, and political networks.

In the Southeast Asian context, this debate is even more complex. Groups such as the Punan in Kalimantan, the Orang Rimba in Jambi (Prasetijo, 2017), the Bateq in Malaysia (Lye, 2004), and the Agta in the Philippines (Minter, 2010) are often labelled as hunter-gatherer groups due to their forest-based subsistence patterns, seasonal mobility, and egalitarian social structures. However, numerous studies indicate that they also engage in shifting cultivation, bartering with neighbours, and patronage relationships with dominant societies (Sellato, 2015; Drapper, 2020). Thus, analysis of hunter-gatherer groups in this region is more appropriately understood as a spectrum of ecological and social adaptations, rather than a purely separate identity from the agrarian world. The context of the transition from hunter-gatherer societies to agriculture, and how contact with agrarian societies influenced changes in technology, subsistence, and mobility, is also a focus of Ikeya (2021), who emphasizes that the dynamics of adaptation, interactions with agrarian groups and the state, and their position in global discourse play a crucial role in the sustainability of these hunter-gatherer communities.

This paper focuses on the Punan Batu Benau Sajau people in Malinau, North Kalimantan, who are currently fighting for recognition of their traditional forest rights. They currently number 37 families with 109 people (as of 2025). They inhabit a forest niche around the Benau Karst Hills, situated among settlements, fields, and oil palm plantations belonging to other communities. The forest, their habitat, is not theirs but is part of a Forest Utilization Business Permit (PBPH) concession area. The key question is: can they still be categorized as a hunter-gatherer society, and if so, what are the criteria? Using a brief ethnographic method for field verification of customary forests in July 2025 and comparing the findings with anthropological literature, this study seeks to understand the subsistence practices, mobility, social structure, cosmology, and contemporary challenges of the Punan Batu. This study enables us to examine the relevance of the hunter-gatherer concept in the contemporary context. It provides an academic basis for recognizing the rights of similarly categorized indigenous communities in Indonesia.

2. Methods

This research employed a short-term ethnographic approach, conducted as part of a series of customary forest verification activities for the Punan Batu Benau Sajau Customary Law Community (MHA) from late July to early August 2025 in Malinau Regency, North Kalimantan. The researcher's position as part of the Integrated Customary Forest Verification Team provided direct access to conduct observations, interviews, and informal discussions with the Punan Batu community, local stakeholders, and representatives of the local government. This approach was chosen because it suited the time-limited field context, yet still allowed for the collection of relevant socio-cultural data on subsistence patterns, mobility, social structure, cosmology, and contemporary challenges.

This scientific method is essential, considering that the Elucidation to Article 67 Paragraph (2) of Law 41 concerning Forestry of 1999 states that: Regional regulations are formulated taking into account the research results of customary law experts, the aspirations of local communities,

customary law community leaders in the relevant area, as well as other appropriate agencies or parties. The implementation of recognition and protection for indigenous communities often bypasses this process, giving rise to several issues later on. Verification of customary forests in communities that still practice hunting and gathering traditions is a first of its kind in Indonesia.

Observation methods were used to understand the community's daily life practices, particularly subsistence activities such as hunting, gathering, and small-scale farming. Observations were conducted through direct interaction at key locations, including the Punan Batu settlement, subsistence forests, and the Bukit Benau karst area, which holds significant cosmological significance. This observational method aligns with Spradley's (1980) view that field anthropology should focus on everyday life experiences to capture cultural meaning.

In addition to observation, this research also relied on in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, heads of households, women, and the younger generation of Punan Batu. Interviews were conducted openly to allow for open narratives about their history of mobility, experiences facing pressure from forestry companies, and the meanings of customary forests. This interview technique follows Kvale's (1996) framework, which emphasizes the importance of life-world interviews to capture the subjective and reflective experiences of informants.

To enrich collective understanding, closed-ended discussions with community groups were also used. These discussions were held in open forums attended by family representatives and traditional leaders, facilitated by participatory methods that allowed communities to express their aspirations, maps of their living spaces, and customary claims. This method aligns with Creswell's (2013) assertion that a combination of individual interviews and group discussions can yield more comprehensive data on community perceptions.

In addition to field data, this research also strengthened its analysis through a literature review. The documents reviewed included academic reports on Punan and hunter-gatherer communities in Southeast Asia (Sellato, 2015; Schrire, 2009; Barnard, 2004), recent scientific publications on Punan genetics and mobility (Lloyd et al., 2022), and national policy documents on the recognition of customary forests. This literature review was used to compare field findings with broader academic discourse and policy frameworks.

By combining observation, interviews, limited discussions, and a literature review, this research aims to capture the dynamics of the Punan Batu community, not only as research objects but also as subjects actively defining themselves. This method also places the research within an applied anthropological framework, which not only produces academic analysis but is also relevant to supporting the legal and political struggles of indigenous peoples in Indonesia (Pink & Morgan, 2013). This method is not only beneficial for scientific knowledge but also represents a progressive step towards creating policies for the protection of indigenous peoples based on sound scientific and field findings. The challenge in this case is identifying the subjects and objects of protection for the Punan Batu Sajau people and their traditional way of life.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Punan The Nomadic Groups of Kalimantan

Punan, who are regarded as a nomadic group, can be found in Kalimantan alongside the Dayak community. Initially, the Punan were hunter-gatherers who collected items from the forest. They are nomads who dwell in the forest. They only leave the forest to go to the riverbed at specific times. Bees, wax, camphor, agarwood, rattan, gum patch, and bird's nest are some of the types of forest goods that are gathered by the Punan. The earliest exchange of forest goods

will take place with other Dayak communities that reside along the banks of essential rivers (Sellato, 2002).

The Punan Dayak are said to have originated in the upper sections of the Kayan Mentarang River and then migrated to Sarawak, North Kalimantan, and East Kalimantan. "Punan" is a broad phrase that refers to a set of communities of hunter-gatherers who historically lived in the forests of East Kalimantan and led a sedentary lifestyle. It is a term used in the Dayak language. The majority of the Punan tribes have been residing in the upper reaches of rivers, even in the centre of extremely secluded forests, up to this point in time. Figure 1 provides information on the distribution of the Punan in the provinces of East and North Kalimantan by Sellato (1994)

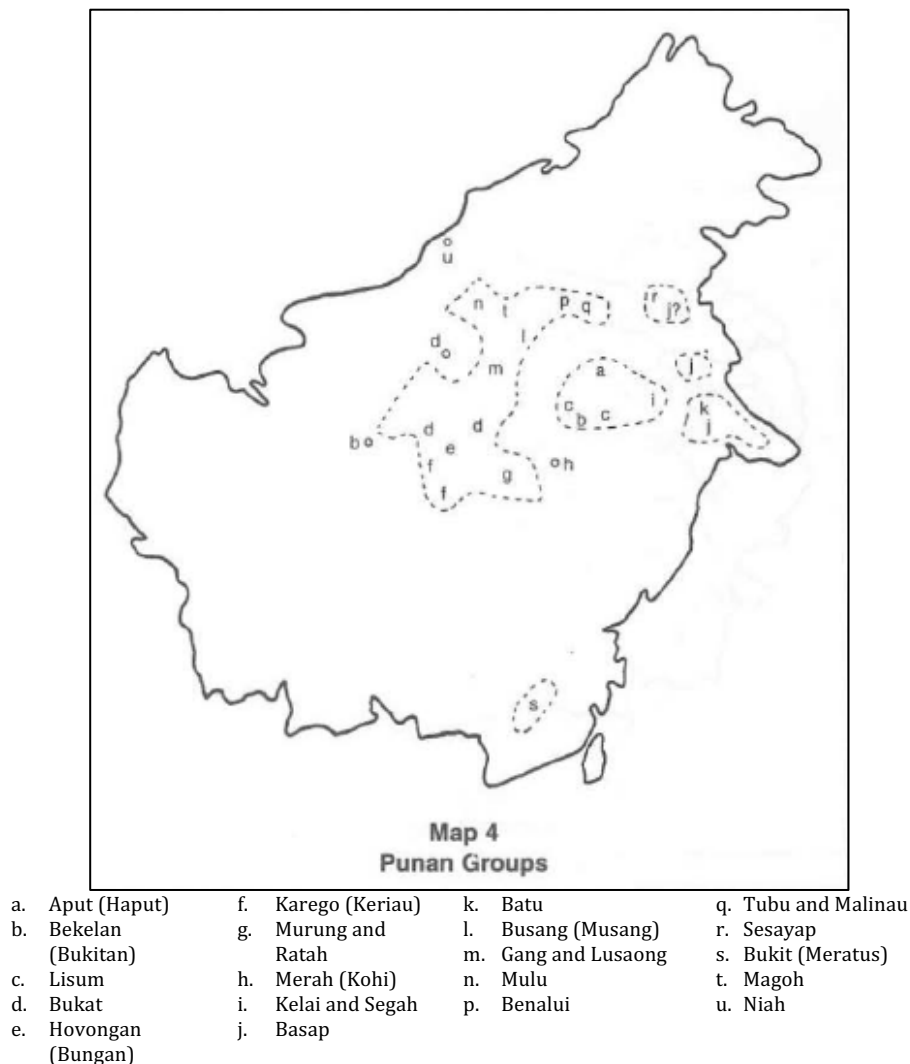


Figure 1. Distribution of Punan Groups

Source: Sellato; Nomads of the Borneo rainforest: The economic, Politics, and ideology of setting down (1994)

According to a data gathering project that was carried out by the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in 2002, the Punan people are distributed throughout the region of East Kalimantan. The population of East Kalimantan is 8,956 individuals, with 2,096 of them people belonging to families of the Punan people, according to the results of the census. At that time, the overall population of East Kalimantan was 2.55 million people, according to the BPS 2002. This number accounted for only 0.35 percent of the province's entire population. They are distributed throughout sixteen sub-districts within six districts. The Malinau Regency is home to as many as 55 percent of the Punan people. Berau Regency is home to 15 percent of the Punan population, while Bulungan Regency is home to 13 percent of the Punan population. In Kutai and other locations, they dispersed the remainder. At that time, it was believed that there were still a significant number of Punan people living in East Kalimantan who had not been recorded. The precise number of people who dispersed into the depths of the forest is unknown at this time.

3.2 Punan Batu Benau Sajau

The Punan Batu Benau Sajau community lives in Sajau Village, Tanjung Palas District, Bulungan Regency, North Kalimantan. Their settlement is located in the upper reaches of the Sajau River, a remote area surrounded by secondary and primary forests. The location of this community is illustrated in Figure 1, which includes a map showing its proximity to the Benau Karst Hills and the surrounding forest landscape. The Punan Batu Benau Sajau hold a unique position in the anthropological debate on the persistence and transformation of hunter-gatherer societies. For centuries, the Punan have been recognized as forest-dwelling groups whose livelihoods depend on seasonal mobility, hunting, and the gathering of non-timber forest products such as rattan, honey, and wild tubers (Kelly, 2012). These practices are deeply tied to their cultural identity, cosmological beliefs, and social structures.

In the past two decades, however, the political and economic landscape of interior Kalimantan has become increasingly complex, placing the Punan Batu at a critical crossroads. The arrival of companies holding *Perizinan Berusaha Pemanfaatan Hutan* (PBPH) permits for timber and plantation development, coupled with the expansion of road and infrastructure networks, has rapidly transformed the forest landscape. These changes have led to the shrinking of their customary territories and restricted their access to essential forest resources. Moreover, large-scale ecological disruptions, such as deforestation and climate-related changes in seasonal patterns, have profoundly affected their subsistence strategies. This has raised urgent questions about the future of the Punan Batu and the continuity of their cultural traditions.

Historically, the Punan people have demonstrated remarkable adaptability. Their long history reflects a dynamic interplay of nomadic mobility, inter-ethnic interactions, and responses to external pressures. In particular, the Punan have long interacted with swidden agriculturalists, especially Dayak groups, in relationships shaped by trade and reciprocity. Sellato (1994) highlights how colonial records and early ethnographies portrayed the Punan as “clients” of agriculturalist groups, exchanging forest products such as rattan and resins for rice and metal tools. These exchanges were not merely economic but also social, cementing hierarchical relationships that often placed the Punan in subordinate positions.



Figure 2. Map of the Location of the Punan Benau Sajau People

The beginning of the integration of the Punan into the formal village administration system was initiated by state-led settlement projects, which was a significant turning point in the twentieth century. Many of the Punan groups had to leave their ancient wandering territories because they were motivated—or occasionally forced—to move to permanent settlements around highways and rivers. Kaskija (2012) contends that these processes of sedentarization not only disrupted traditional mobility patterns but also led to a degradation of cultural practices associated with forest care and customary governance.

The identity of the Punan Batu people is situated at the nexus of transformation and continuity. They continue to depend on hunting and gathering for their subsistence, but they also participate in marketplaces, educational systems, and state organisations. This duality exemplifies what anthropologists refer to as a "forager-farmer continuum," in which groups transition between subsistence modes in response to changes in socio-ecological variables. In this context, the concept of "hunter-gatherer" is not simply descriptive; it is also intensely political. It becomes a battleground for resolving conflicts over land rights, the legal recognition of customary rights, and the development of policies related to conservation and development.

3.3 Subsistence Patterns and Ecological Resilience of Punan Batu Benau Sajau

The subsistence patterns of the Punan Batu Benau Sajau remain closely tied to the characteristics of a hunter-gatherer society, with a primary focus on hunting, gathering, and collecting non-timber forest products as their primary livelihood. They hunt wild boar, deer, and antelope using dogs and blowguns, while women and children gather forest resources, such as rattan, honey, and tubers. Although some families have begun to cultivate small gardens and sell seasonal honey, hunting and gathering continue to form the core of their cultural identity. Historically, the Punan Batu also gathered rattan, agarwood, gum jenang, and balam to sell to traders, along with swallow nests collected from the niches and caves in the Benau Karst Hills.

These nests were traditionally sold to designated families recognized by the Sultan of Bulungan, known locally as *Maulana*, who served as intermediaries in a customary trade network. However, these valuable non-timber forest products have largely vanished due to overharvesting and environmental damage, leaving the Punan Batu with fewer means to support their livelihoods.

Fieldwork has demonstrated that the Punan Batu possess a deep understanding of ecological knowledge essential for their survival. This includes a detailed understanding of forest ecology, such as interpreting natural signs to determine hunting seasons, tracking animal movements, and recognizing the flowering cycle of honey trees (*kayu madu*) that bloom seasonally in the Benau Karst region. This traditional knowledge, part of their intangible cultural heritage, is passed orally through generations. It also informs sustainable harvesting practices, ensuring resources are collected at times that allow for natural renewal. However, this system faces significant challenges due to shrinking roaming areas, encroachment from Perizinan Berusaha Pemanfaatan Hutan (PBPH) concessions, and unpredictable seasonal changes driven by climate change. These pressures threaten not only their livelihood activities but also the spiritual and cosmological bonds they share with the forest.

Genetic and archaeological research (Maier et al., 2023) indicates that the Punan Batu group has a longstanding history as nomadic gatherers within Kalimantan's interior. This enduring presence illustrates their resilience, shaped by adapting to the ever-changing rainforest environment. In today's context, their livelihood methods are no longer solely those of isolated foragers. Instead, they exemplify what Headland and Reid (1989) call a "forager-farmer continuum," combining traditional hunting and gathering with some agricultural experiments and market-based activities. For instance, while certain families engage in small-scale farming of cassava or vegetables, they still rely on hunting and gathering for food security and cultural identity. Selling honey or forest products in nearby markets provides additional cash income, but this remains secondary to their primary subsistence practices.

As Gowdy (1998) explains, the hunter-gatherer subsistence system is inherently sustainable because it is based on the regeneration of natural resources and operates within the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. This balance is threatened when the ecological space required for these practices is taken over by external forces, such as logging concessions or land conversion for plantations. In the case of the Punan Batu, loss of access to ancestral hunting grounds has forced them into increasingly marginal areas, reducing their capacity to maintain traditional subsistence cycles. Consequently, their ecological resilience—the ability to adapt while sustaining cultural practices—is under threat.

The current subsistence patterns of the Punan Batu thus reflect a complex struggle to balance tradition and adaptation. While they have shown remarkable flexibility in incorporating new livelihood strategies, such as gardening and limited trade, these efforts cannot fully compensate for the erosion of their customary forests. Legal recognition of these forests is essential, not only to secure their material survival but also to safeguard their cultural heritage and ecological knowledge. Without such protection, the Punan Batu risk being pushed further toward dependence on external aid or wage labor, undermining both their autonomy and the sustainability of the forest ecosystem they have long stewarded. Their future resilience will depend on a combination of community-led resource management, recognition of their customary rights, and supportive policies that respect their unique socio-ecological system.

3.4 Seasonal Mobility and Living Space of Punan Batu Benau Sajau

Seasonal mobility is a fundamental characteristic of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, including that of the Punan Batu Benau Sajau. They have long practiced a nomadic pattern of movement,

following hunting seasons, the availability of food sources, and the ecological cycles of the forest. During certain seasons, they settle near small rivers to search for fish and wildlife, while at other times, they move deeper into the forest to gather honey, rattan, and tubers. This movement is not merely an economic strategy, but also part of their approach to managing their living space without damaging the ecosystem's regenerative capacity. As Woodburn (1982) stated, the high mobility of hunter-gatherer communities reflects the principle of an "immediate return system," which involves consuming the harvest immediately without hoarding excess, thus ensuring ecological sustainability. To illustrate their lifestyle, their settlement patterns are shown in Figure 3, which relates to their shelter in the cave niche of the Benau Karst Hills.



Figure 3. The Settlement of the Punan People of Batu Benau Sajau in the Cave Niches

In the context of the Punan Batu, seasonal mobility is also closely linked to social and cosmological dimensions. Migration to the Benau karst region, for example, is not only for hunting but also to maintain spiritual connections with ancestors believed to reside in limestone caves. This mobility pattern shapes their own social map, demonstrating that the primary forest landscape holds a crucial function for them, or what could be called their cultural landscape. Their directional orientation is based on river courses, cave locations, and game trails. Ingold (2000) explained this in his discussion of the "taskscape" of hunter-gatherer societies, stating that hunter-gatherer space is shaped by a series of constantly shifting socio-ecological activities, not simply by geographic coordinates.

However, seasonal mobility now faces structural barriers. The PBPH concessions surrounding their territory restrict access, while administrative village policies encourage them to settle. This situation aligns with Adi Prasetyo's (2017) findings in the case of another hunter-gatherer group, the Orang Rimba, which demonstrates how the mobility of hunter-gatherer communities in Indonesia is often considered an "anomaly" by the state, despite mobility being an adaptive mechanism that supports ecological sustainability. As a result, the Punan Batu's living space is increasingly shrinking, and their mobility patterns are gradually becoming more fragmented.

Nevertheless, resilience is evident in their efforts to maintain seasonal routes, despite their limitations. Schrire (2009) states that hunter-gatherer communities are not static, but actors constantly negotiating space within ecological and political changes. Thus, the seasonal mobility of the Punan Batu Benau Sajau today is not merely a subsistence practice, but also a political and identity strategy, affirming their position as hunter-gatherer communities amidst the pressures of modernity and politics.

3.5 Social Structure and Decision Making of Punan Batu Benau Sajau

The social structure of the Punan Batu Benau Sajau demonstrates the egalitarian character typical of hunter-gatherer societies. In their daily lives, they do not recognize a strict hierarchical system, such as permanent chiefs or rigid social stratification. Social relations are built on kinship, genealogical proximity, and solidarity within small groups that move according to subsistence cycles. They emphasize that essential decisions—such as seasonal campsite locations, distribution of game, and even attitudes toward company claims in forest areas—are discussed collectively through deliberation, with each group member entitled to express their views.

The leadership pattern, chosen through consensus, could be said to reflect the egalitarian values prevalent in hunter-gatherer societies. The lack of a fixed leadership inheritance structure is a characteristic of societies with diffuse authority. This condition aligns with Woodburn's (1982) description of egalitarian societies operating within an immediate-return economy, where excessive resource accumulation does not occur, thereby preventing structural inequality. In such societies, every individual is considered equal in their rights to speak, hunt, and access resources. Ingold (2000) added that "egalitarianism is embedded in the relational field of dwelling," meaning that equality is not merely an abstract principle but rather emerges from the way they interact with the environment and each other.

In the Punan Batu context, decision-making mechanisms operate through open discussion. The role of "leader" is more accurately described as a facilitator or mediator, respected for their experience, forest knowledge, or speaking skills. However, their authority is not coercive. As Sellato (1994) noted for the Punan groups in Kalimantan, leadership is more fluid and contextual, shifting from one individual to another as the situation demands. In practice, the Punan Batu reject internal domination that could break group cohesion.

This egalitarianism is also evident in the distribution mechanism for produce. Game meat is divided equally among all camp members, regardless of who contributed the most to the hunt. They share not only the catch but also other forest resources. This distribution system emphasizes the principle of sharing as a foundation of social ethics. Schrire (2009) emphasized that in hunter-gatherer societies, sharing is not merely economic distribution but also a means of strengthening social bonds and maintaining group cohesion.

However, contemporary challenges are slowly shifting this mechanism. Contact with surrounding villages and interactions with the formal bureaucracy necessitate the appointment of permanent representatives in official forums. This sometimes creates tension, as the logic of the state bureaucracy, which requires a "traditional leader" figure, often conflicts with their egalitarian patterns. Codding & Kramer (2016) noted that when traditional subsistence patterns are disrupted among subsistence-based and forager communities, the role and function of leaders previously responsible for directing hunting, gathering, or other ecological practices can also change. Nevertheless, the Punan Batu continue to maintain collective decision-making methods while adapting to external demands.

3.6 Spatial Cosmology of Forest Landscapes of Punan Batu Benau Sajau

For the Punan Batu Benau Sajau, the forest is far more than an ecological zone or a collection of economic resources. It represents a **cosmological landscape**, a living and spiritual entity that defines their collective identity and underpins their customary claims. In this worldview, the forest is understood through a web of ancestral relationships, spiritual forces, and historical narratives. Every tree, hill, river, and cave has a role within this interconnected system. The Benau Karst Hills, for instance, are not merely prominent physical landmarks but are revered as **sacred centers where ancestral spirits are believed to reside**, acting as guardians who maintain the balance of nature and guide the community's relationship with the land.

During our study, it became evident that the Punan Batu attach specific meanings to different forest areas. Certain zones are designated as **sacred sites** where rituals must be performed before hunting or gathering begins, while other areas serve as historical routes of seasonal mobility, linking past and present generations. These pathways are not random; they follow **cosmological maps** encoded in oral traditions and reinforced through storytelling and ritual practices. The forest, in this sense, is a "living text" that cannot be reduced to abstract maps or cadastral surveys.

This spatial cosmology fundamentally challenges conventional land governance systems, which tend to focus on fixed boundaries and legal titles. For the Punan Batu, **boundaries are fluid and relational**, defined by ecological markers and ancestral memory rather than by formal demarcations. They do not conceptualize land as a commodity to be owned; instead, they emphasize stewardship of forest resources. For example, rather than claiming absolute ownership of a plot of land, they identify and mark particular trees that are essential for community survival—such as trees used for blowpipe poison, medicinal plants, or honey production. Figure 4 illustrates how certain marked trees serve as symbolic indicators of social and ecological relationships, rather than as property lines.



Figure 4. Punan People Show a Tree whose Sap is Used For Blowpipe Poison.

Additionally, the forest serves as a cosmological repository, preserving the past of the people and the moral commitments they have to one another. Each landscape element relates a narrative of origins, migration, or historical interactions with other communities. These stories not only provide guidance on the utilisation of resources, but they also provide insight into the ways in which the community understands justice and reciprocity. Sellato (1994) points out that throughout history, the Punan have utilised cosmological myths as a means of establishing their rights while engaging with external players such as concession firms or governmental authorities. Likewise, Schrire (2009) provides evidence that hunter-gatherer cultures from around the world often establish territorial legitimacy through symbolic relationships with the landscape, rather than through written legal systems.

The fight for acknowledgement by the Punan Batu is greatly complicated by their unique perspective on the world. The fact that their efforts to have their customary forest formally acknowledged by the Ministry of Forestry are not simply administrative procedures is proof that their efforts are acts of cultural survival. The Punan Batu are fighting to safeguard a complete cosmological system that connects their past, present, and future by demanding legal recognition. Should these demands be refused or ignored, not only could their worldly livelihoods be in jeopardy, but the spiritual frameworks that provide meaning to their own existence could also be at jeopardy. In this context, protecting the customary rights to forests is a mechanism that simultaneously serves to preserve cultural heritage that cannot be touched and to conserve the environment, allowing future generations to carry on their existence in the forest by navigating it through the stories, rituals, and ancestral relationships that define them as a people.

3.7 Contemporary Challenges and Resilience

The Punan Batu Benau Sajau community faces significant challenges, both external and internal, today. The most obvious pressure comes from the expansion of Forest Utilization Business Permits (PBPH) concessions, which encompass almost their entire range. They legally control the Punan Batu's living space, thus restricting their access to forest food sources such as rattan, honey, deer, and pigs. This situation is further exacerbated by the threat of ecological destruction in the Benau karst region, which is central to their cosmology and historical origins. During a meeting in July 2025, a traditional elder bitterly stated that if the caves and hills were lost, the Punan Batu would no longer have a place to tell their stories of their origins. This loss is not only a loss of physical space but also the cultural significance that binds their collective identity. As Sellato (1994) points out, forager groups like the Punan Batu have always been placed in a highly vulnerable position in modern ecological politics, as their living space constantly overlaps with large-scale economic interests. In addition to ecological threats, the social changes triggered by state integration also pose significant challenges. The administrative village system requires them to have a permanent address, attend formal schooling, and adhere to bureaucratic structures. Yet, the Punan Batu have long survived through mobility, moving following game trails and forest harvest seasons. This forced integration process, as Adi Prasetijo (2021) notes in his ethnographic study of the Orang Rimba, often places hunter-gatherer communities in a position considered backward and in need of development programs. This leads them to experience a situation of "displacement," or a mismatch between their life knowledge and mentality and their current environment. Within this framework, their ecological knowledge and wisdom are not recognized as equal; instead, they are positioned as cultural remnants in need of transformation.

Nevertheless, the Punan Batu demonstrate a resilience that cannot be underestimated. One strategy they employ is subsistence diversification, continuing hunting and gathering while

gradually developing small gardens. For them, hunting and accessing caves are not merely economic activities, but rather a fundamental right inherent in their identity. Resilience is also evident in the strengthening of traditional solidarity networks. In the customary forest verification process, this community formed alliances with NGOs, academics, and local governments to advocate for the formal recognition of their customary forests. Cosmological grounds served as a moral argument, while local legal instruments, such as the Punan Batu Benau Sajau MHA Regional Regulation, were used to strengthen their legitimacy.

Their resilience can also be understood not as a result, but as a dynamic process. For the Punan Batu, resilience does not mean abandoning hunting traditions and transitioning entirely to farming, but rather the ability to combine the old and new worlds in negotiating living spaces within the modern state system. This is what enables the Punan Batu to persist: they not only adapt economically but also demonstrate identity resilience, maintaining their name, cosmology, and claims to the forest despite intensifying external pressures. Thus, contemporary challenges have not erased their existence but have instead given rise to new forms of resilience rooted in forest cosmology, solidarity networks, and cultural political strategies.

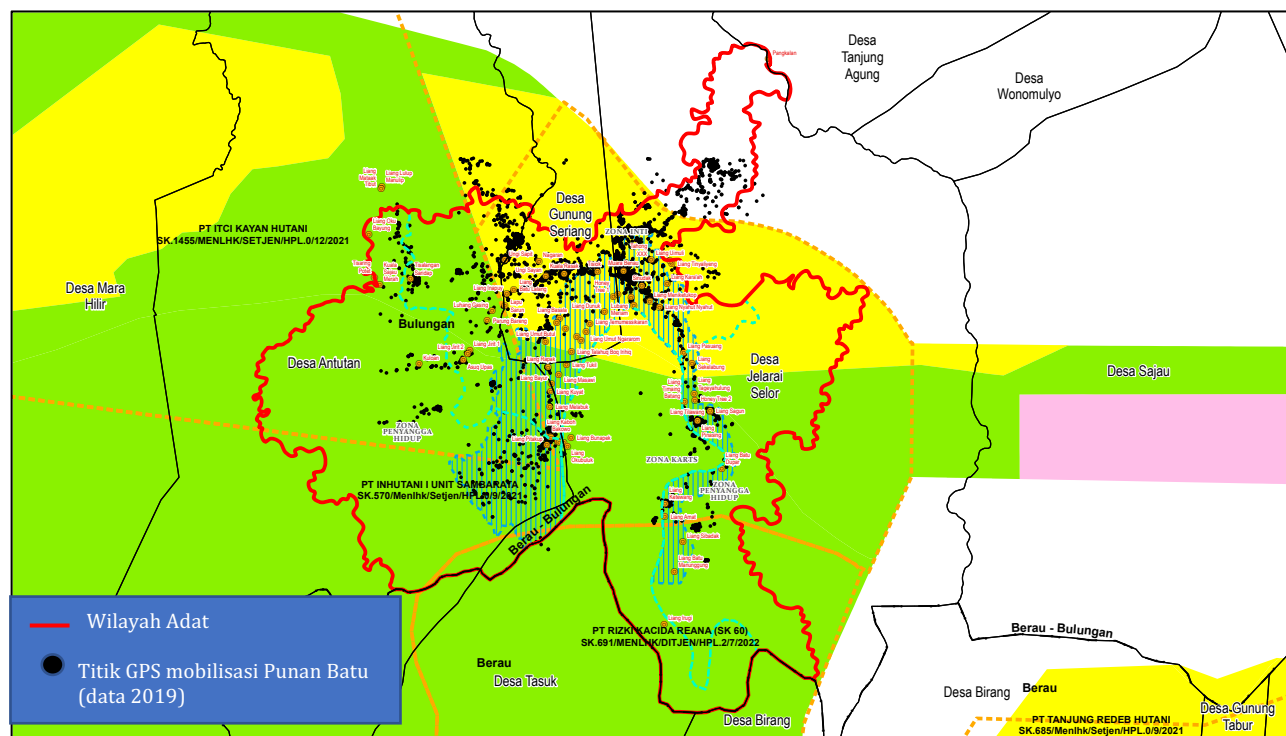


Figure 5. Map of the Situation and Territory Location of the Punan Benau Sajau People

Bulungan Regency has adopted several studies that have been conducted previously by issuing Regional Regulation No. 12 of 2016 concerning the Recognition and Protection of Indigenous Peoples (MHA) and Bulungan Regent Decree Number 188.45/319 of 2023 concerning the recognition and protection of the Punan Batu Benau Sajau Indigenous Peoples in Bulungan Regency as the basis for determining its customary territory. The area of the customary territory, as defined by the Regent's Decree, is 18,430 hectares, with the division of space as follows: living space of 5,440 hectares, roaming area of 9,744 hectares, and Benau karst mountain area of 3,246 hectares. HI Kayan Hutani, PT Inhutani, and PT Rizki Kacida Reana. The map in Figure 4 above shows that their hunter-gatherer mobilization patterns are not limited by village

administrative boundaries or forestry concession limits, as these boundaries do not have a footprint level. The problem that has arisen is that their roaming area is being squeezed by land-clearing activities conducted by various parties, particularly the clearing of oil palm plantations by the community and other parties, which is increasingly reducing their living space.

4. Conclusion

The "hunter-gatherer" category is not a straightforward designation, as evidenced by a study of the Punan Batu Benau Saja people. Instead, it is the outcome of ongoing theoretical discussions and the continuous evolution of factual realities. The stance of the Punan Batu exemplifies this complexity, starting with the original discussion by Lee and DeVore (1968), who stressed the universality of hunter-gatherer patterns, and concluding with Headland and Reid's (1989) rejection of the concept of "continuing hunter-gatherers." On the one hand, they continue to retain knowledge of forest ecology, hunting and gathering practices, and a cosmology that positions the forest environment at the centre of their lives. On the other hand, transformations in their subsistence patterns have begun to occur as a result of external forces, which include the infiltration of the National Forestry Agency (PBPH), state policies, and changes in the landscape.

The Punan Batu Benau Saja continue to exhibit the collective decision-making processes, seasonal mobility, and equality that are characteristic of hunter-gatherer communities, according to a small field study. Nevertheless, contemporary realities also demonstrate their capacity to adapt and endure by integrating tradition with new techniques, enabling them to thrive in the face of changing political and ecological circumstances. As a result, the identity of the Punan Batu as a hunter-gatherer cannot be comprehended in a reductionist manner; rather, it is an identity that is in a state of permanent negotiation, flux, and transformation.

The significance of linking theoretical discussions to ethnographic data that is relevant to the setting is highlighted in this work. By way of example, the Punan Batu Benau Saja exhibit demonstrates that communities in Southeast Asia that practice hunting and gathering have not only preserved traditions that are thousands of years old but have also taken an active role in addressing contemporary issues through their customary forests. This has the effect of bolstering cultural identity and resilience strategies in the face of environmental change and outside pressures. As a result, this research provides input to the ongoing conversation in the field of anthropology about the significance of the label "hunter-gatherer" in the modern era.

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