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## From Myth to Modernity: Socio-Cultural Resilience and Transformation of the *Bemoyo* Community in Suti Semarang Village, West Kalimantan (1939–2025)

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the historical transformation of Suti Semarang Village in Bengkayang Regency, West Kalimantan, from its mythological origins in the Semorongk–Siti legend to its contemporary form as a modern administrative village (1939–2025). Focusing on the Dayak Bemoyo sub-ethnic group, the study addresses a significant gap in the literature, which has largely overlooked the long-term socio-cultural resilience of this community amid administrative restructuring, economic change, and external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by three central questions—concerning the village’s pre-1939 history, its formal establishment and renaming in 1969, and the evolution of its social, economic, and cultural practices—this research integrates oral histories, field observations, village documentation, and official records within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. The findings reveal that core Bemoyo elements, including origin myths, gotong royong, hutan temawang management, and ancestral veneration, have not disappeared but have been functionally transformed. What were once primarily practical and ritual practices have increasingly become symbolic resources for identity maintenance and social cohesion. This study argues that Dayak Bemoyo intangible cultural heritage is sustained not through rigid preservation but through adaptive reinvention. It contributes to broader scholarly discussions on cultural resilience, the invention of tradition, and rural modernity in Borneo.*

*Keywords: Dayak Bemoyo; socio-cultural resilience; intangible cultural heritage; cultural adaptation; rural transformation; West Kalimantan.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Names and origins carry profound power in Borneo. In many Dayak communities, the stories of how villages and ethnic identities were formed often blur the boundary between myth and history.

These narratives do not merely explain the past; they continue to shape contemporary claims to belonging, territory, and cultural legitimacy (Adi Wijayanto, 2023; Deo et al., 2025; Kumpiady Widen, 2024; Muhammad Syaifulloh, 2014). In the context of rapid modernisation and administrative reform, such origin stories become strategic resources through which communities negotiate resilience amid change.

Suti Semarang Village in Bengkayang Regency, West Kalimantan, presents a rich case for understanding this dynamic. Originally known as Kampung *Semorongk*, the village traces its foundation to the *Semorongk–Siti* legend, which tells of a spiritually powerful ancestor who travelled to Java and returned with his wife to establish the first *Bemoyo* community. This mythological origin, reinforced by material traces such as hutan tembawang, ancient graves, and remnants of longhouse pillars (*kayu beliang*), continues to anchor the community's identity even as it has transformed into a formally recognised administrative village.

Scholars have long observed that village formation in West Kalimantan cannot be separated from broader historical forces, including migration patterns, colonial administration, missionary activities, and post-independence development policies (Muafi HIMAM, 2018; Tanasaldy, 2014). Law No. 6 of 2014 concerning Villages has granted greater autonomy to rural communities; yet in practice, state-driven development frequently prioritises economic productivity, infrastructure, and integration into wider markets over the safeguarding of historical memory and customary knowledge (REKHA A/P SELVARAJOO, 2022; Yesi Belina Oktaviana, 2024).

Within Dayak societies, cultural practices have repeatedly demonstrated remarkable adaptability. The transformation of *kuntao* among the Iban—from a martial art rooted in self-defence to a performative expression of identity—illustrates how tradition can be reinterpreted without losing its symbolic power (Jiton et al., 2025; Green, 2001). Similar patterns appear in the management of *hutan tembawang*, *gotong royong*, and ancestral rituals among various Dayak groups, where functional roles gradually shift toward symbolic and educational purposes (Jiton et al., 2025; Joon & Bmm, 2022; Syaifulloh, 2019a).

Despite growing scholarship on Dayak cultural heritage, significant gaps remain. Most studies on village history in West Kalimantan are either short-term ethnographic accounts or broad regional analyses that rarely trace the long-term evolution of a single sub-ethnic group across nearly nine decades (Sindia et al., 2025; Wiranto & Setyawan, 2025). Research specifically addressing the *Bemoyo* sub-ethnic group is particularly scarce. While studies on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) have increased following UNESCO's 2003 Convention, few have examined how smaller Dayak communities actively rework mythical narratives and customary practices to maintain identity within modern administrative structures (Eilenberg, 2022; Murdani, 2024).

This study therefore seeks to bridge that gap by offering a longitudinal analysis of Suti Semarang Village from 1939 to 2025. It examines how the Dayak *Bemoyo* community has navigated the transition from a forest-based, longhouse-oriented society to a modern rural village marked by commercial agriculture, bureaucratic integration, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Hobsbawm and Ranger (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012; Junaidy et al., 2024) on the “invention of tradition” and Connerton (Vivian et al., 2024) on

social memory, this research views cultural resilience not as static preservation but as a continuous process of reinterpretation and adaptation.

Theoretically, the study is situated within constructivist-interpretivist and historical approaches. It understands identity as fluid and relational (Covarrubias Venegas, 2019; Kuprii, 2024; Viseu, 1999; Vivian et al., 2024), shaped by the interplay between local agency and external structural forces. Rather than treating *Bemoyo* identity as a fixed ethnic essence, this article explores how it is actively constructed through origin myths, genealogical claims, customary practices, and responses to administrative reform.

The research is guided by three central questions: First, what was the historical and cultural condition of the *Bemoyo* community in the region prior to 1939? Second, how did the village achieve formal shape in 1939, and what processes led to its official renaming as Suti Semarang in 1969? Third, how have the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of village life evolved between 1939 and 2025, particularly in response to administrative change, economic transformation, and the COVID-19 pandemic?

By addressing these questions, this article contributes to the growing body of scholarship on rural Borneo by demonstrating that intangible cultural heritage remains vibrant precisely because communities possess the capacity to reinvent tradition in response to changing realities.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, historically grounded ethnographic approach to trace the long-term transformation of Suti Semarang Village and its *Dayak Bemoyo* community. Recognising that identities and cultural meanings are fluid and socially constructed, the research is situated within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 1994). This perspective views historical realities as best understood through the lived experiences, memories, and interpretive frameworks of local actors across generations (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2020).

A longitudinal design was adopted, enabling deep engagement with the community over an extended period. Fieldwork was conducted intermittently between 2023 and 2025, allowing the researcher to observe changes and build trust with informants. Primary data were generated through a combination of semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis. Five key informants were purposively selected based on their depth of historical and customary knowledge: Samuel S.Th (50 years, Village Head), Bingkes (96 years, customary elder), Makeng (66 years, customary elder), David (64 years, *ketua adat*), and Markus Sasi (45 years, Head of RT 01). These individuals represent both older and middle generations, providing critical perspectives across temporal layers of memory.

Interviews, lasting between 60 and 120 minutes, were conducted face-to-face in the informants' homes. Rather than treating oral accounts as mere factual data, the researcher applied a hermeneutic sensitivity (Patterson & Williams, 2002), seeking to understand not only what was remembered but how and why certain memories were emphasised or silenced. Site visits to *hutan tembawang*, ancestral graves, former longhouse sites, and ritual locations served as

important mnemonic anchors, allowing the material landscape to converse with oral narratives. Genealogical records, village documents, photographs, and official archives concerning the 2002–2003 sub-district division were triangulated with these sources to strengthen interpretive reliability and address gaps in recall.

Secondary data included academic works on Dayak societies, village governance, and intangible cultural heritage, as well as official statistical records from the sub-district office. Population data were analysed to map demographic shifts from approximately 200 inhabitants in the late 1930s to 4,579 by 2025. Rather than treating quantitative data as central, these figures were used to contextualise and corroborate qualitative findings regarding migration, administrative reorganisation, and social change.

Data analysis followed an iterative process. Descriptive-chronological reconstruction was used to organise events across time, while analytical interpretation focused on identifying functional shifts in customary practices, the reworking of myths, and patterns of socio-cultural resilience. Following (Patterson & Williams, 2002) special attention was given to how social memory operates through both narrative and embodied practices. Triangulation across oral, material, and documentary sources, combined with member checking whereby key findings were returned to informants for verification and feedback, enhanced the trustworthiness of the interpretation.

Ethical considerations were paramount. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and cultural protocols were respected, particularly when discussing sacred knowledge and ancestral narratives. The study recognises its limitations, including the relatively small number of informants and the challenges of conducting fieldwork during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the combination of longitudinal engagement, methodological triangulation, and theoretical reflexivity has enabled a nuanced understanding of how the *Bemoyo* community sustains its identity through continuous adaptation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Village histories in Indonesia are inherently intertwined with processes of migration, adaptation, and negotiation with state power. As the smallest formal unit of community governance, the *desa* has long served as both a site of cultural continuity and an instrument of national development (Lutfi Al Fathi et al., 2026; Sani Deta, 2025). Law No. 6 of 2014 concerning Villages grants rural communities greater autonomy to manage their affairs based on customary norms and original rights. In practice, however, development policies have frequently prioritised economic growth, infrastructure expansion, and integration into market systems, often at the expense of historical memory and cultural preservation (Robiyanto et al., 2022; Streimikiene et al., 2021).

Within West Kalimantan, *Dayak* communities have demonstrated remarkable socio-cultural resilience amid repeated transformations. Longhouse settlements, animist belief

systems, *gotong royong*, and forest management practices such as *hutan tembawang* have persisted, even as their functions have shifted across time (Syaifulloh, 2016; Wibowo et al., 2024). Studies on the *Dayak Bidayuh* in Singkawang and the *Dayak Iban* in Sarawak show that customary practices rarely disappear completely; instead, they are reinterpreted to meet new social, economic, and political realities (Aurellia Ressi, 2024; Syahputra et al., 2024). The transformation of *kuntao* from a martial tradition into a performative art form is one clear example of how cultural elements can be preserved through adaptation rather than rigid continuity (Devitaria et al., 2023; Jiton et al., 2025).

These dynamics are closely related to the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). UNESCO (2020) defines ICH as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage. In Borneo, elements such as origin myths, ancestral veneration, traditional music, weaving, and forest management fall within this category. However, modernisation, Christianity, tourism, and administrative reform have created complex challenges. As sacred and ritual elements are increasingly performed for public audiences, questions arise regarding authenticity, commodification, and the potential loss of deeper spiritual meanings (Precillia, 2025; Syaifulloh, 2019b).

Theoretical contributions from (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012) on the “invention of tradition” and (Kuprii, 2024) on social memory provide valuable lenses for understanding these processes. Traditions are not static relics of the past but are continuously recreated to serve present needs. Similarly, (Rogers Brubaker, 2006) remind us that ethnic and cultural identities are not fixed essences but relational and situational categories shaped by political, economic, and historical contexts. In Borneo, where colonial administration, missionary activities, and post-independence policies have repeatedly redrawn boundaries and classifications, such theoretical insights are particularly relevant.

Despite a growing body of literature on *Dayak* societies and rural development in West Kalimantan, important gaps persist. Most studies remain either broad regional surveys or short-term ethnographic accounts focused on major ethnic groups such as the Iban, Kantuk, or Bidayuh (Joon & Bmm, 2022). Research that specifically examines smaller sub-ethnic groups like the *Bemoyo* over a long historical span (1939–2025) is still limited. Furthermore, few studies have systematically analysed how mythological narratives, customary practices, and community resilience interact with administrative restructuring, commercial agriculture, and contemporary crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Postill, 2000).

Existing scholarship on intangible cultural heritage in Indonesia has tended to focus on documentation and preservation strategies, often within formal policy frameworks. While valuable, these studies rarely explore the lived, everyday processes through which communities actively reinterpret their heritage to maintain identity amid structural change (Syaifulloh, 2016). There remains a need for grounded, longitudinal case studies that bridge mythological origins, historical experience, and contemporary adaptation.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a detailed historical ethnography of Suti Semarang Village and the *Dayak Bemoyo* community. By integrating oral histories, material traces, and official records, it examines how one community has sustained its cultural core while continuously adapting to changing political, economic, and environmental conditions. In doing so, it contributes to theoretical debates on socio-cultural resilience, the dynamic nature of tradition, and the politics of memory in rural Borneo.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### *Profile of Informants and Demographic Dynamics*

The strength of this study lies in the depth of oral testimonies provided by five key informants who collectively represent multiple generations of *Bemoyo* cultural memory. Bingkes (96 years) and Makeng (66 years), both customary elders, offered extensive historical narratives that reach back to the pre-1939 period. David (64 years), the *ketua adat*, provided detailed accounts of ritual practices and customary law. Samuel S.Th (50 years), the current village head, and Markus Sasi (45 years), Head of RT 01, contributed contemporary perspectives on governance and social change. Their accounts were cross-verified through triangulation with documentary sources and field observations. Table 1 presents their profiles.

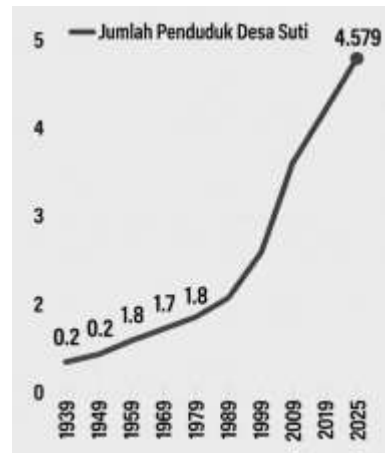
TABLE 1. Categories of Research Informants

No	Informant Name	Age (Years)	Position/Role	Customary Knowledge*
1	Samuel S.Th	50	Village Head	100%
2	Bingkes	96	Customary Elder	100%
3	Makeng	66	Customary Elder	100%
4	David	64	Ketua Adat	100%
5	Markus Sasi	45	Head of RT 01	100%

\*Note: Customary knowledge was assessed qualitatively based on each informant’s ability to explain history, genealogies, and *Bemoyo* customary practices.

Demographic records show a dramatic transformation. In the early years (1939–1960s), the village was a small settlement of roughly 40 households and approximately 200 people. By 2025, the population had grown to 4,579. This expansion, illustrated in Figure 1, was driven by natural increase, migration, and especially the administrative effects of sub-district formation in 2002–2003. Informants noted that while population growth brought improved infrastructure, it also weakened intimate social bonds that once characterised village life.

FIGURE 1. Population Growth in Suti Semarang Village (1939–2025)



Source: Processed from interview data and sub-district census, 2025.

### ***Mythic Origins and Pre-1939 History***

The *Semorongk–Siti* legend remains the cosmological foundation of *Bemoyo* identity. All informants recounted that *Semorongk*, a spiritually powerful ancestor, meditated in the deep forest, travelled to Java, married Siti, and returned to establish the first settlement. This myth functions as what (Kuprii, 2024) calls a “mnemonics of the body” — it is repeatedly performed in oral storytelling, ritual, and attachment to landscape. The early community lived in longhouses, practised hunting, resin collection, and maintained strict customary law centred on harmony with nature and ancestors.

A major fire destroyed the original settlement (*Tembawang Hangus*), forcing relocation. The surviving *hutan tembawang*, *kayu beliang*, and ancestral graves continue to serve as physical evidence and living memory anchors. These material traces do not merely support oral history; they actively shape how the community understands its past and claims its identity in the present.

### ***Village Formation in 1939 and Renaming in 1969***

The year 1939 marked a deliberate act of unification. Leaders from scattered hamlets agreed to form a single community for stronger social organisation and protection. This event is remembered as the formal birth of the village. The late *Lingga* played a pivotal role in the early years, maintaining customary law and mediating with outsiders.

In 1969, the village was officially renamed *Suti Semarang*. This was a conscious cultural act to honour the ancestral couple. The renaming strengthened collective identity at a time when Christianity was gaining influence. Traditional elements such as *perang mandau*, hunting

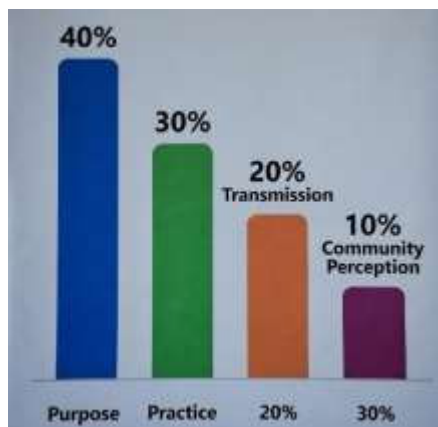
practices, and the ritual use of *ketawak/gong* remained important, serving both practical and symbolic functions during this transitional period.

### ***Social, Economic, and Cultural Evolution (1939–2025)***

From 1939 to 2025, Suti Semarang experienced continuous transformation across multiple domains. The arrival of Christianity in the late 1960s altered spiritual life, yet many *Bemoyo* values persisted in adapted forms. Economically, the community shifted from forest-based subsistence to commercial agriculture. The creation of the sub-district in 2002–2003 accelerated infrastructure development but also contributed to the decline of certain ritual intensities.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) tested the community’s resilience. When formal systems faltered, customary networks of mutual assistance and the use of village resources proved vital for survival. Figure 2 shows how informants perceived changes in the functions of custom. The data indicate a clear shift: practical and ritual purposes have diminished, while the role of custom in reinforcing identity and social cohesion has become more prominent.

FIGURE 2. Changing Functions of Custom in Suti Semarang Village



Source: Qualitative analysis of interview data, 2025.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

### ***Shifts in the Functions and Meanings of Dayak Bemoyo Custom***

The empirical findings clearly show that customary practices in Suti Semarang Village have undergone significant functional shifts from 1939 to 2025. Practices that were once primarily practical and ritual-oriented — such as *gotong royong* for mutual survival, *hutan tembawang* management for subsistence, and ancestral rituals for spiritual protection — have gradually transformed into symbolic resources that serve identity affirmation and social cohesion. This

transformation is not a sign of cultural decline, but rather an adaptive strategy. As one elder informant stated, “Adat dulu untuk hidup, sekarang adat untuk ingat siapa kita.” This emic perspective strongly resonates with (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012) concept of the invention of tradition, whereby cultural elements are selectively preserved and reinterpreted to fit contemporary needs.

The administrative restructuring in 2002–2003 and the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift. When formal government support was limited during the pandemic, customary networks based on *gotong royong* and communal solidarity became critical coping mechanisms. These observations confirm that *Bemoyo* custom is not a static relic but a living, flexible framework that adjusts its functions according to changing social, economic, and environmental conditions.

### ***Socio-Cultural Resilience and Modernisation***

The concept of socio-cultural resilience emerges as a central theme in this study. Rather than being eroded by modernisation, *Bemoyo* identity has shown considerable adaptive capacity. The community has managed to maintain core values — unity, respect for ancestors, and mutual assistance — even as external forms (longhouse living, hunting practices, and ritual intensity) have changed. This finding supports (Sani Deta, 2025) argument that identity in frontier regions is relational, situational, and continuously negotiated.

Compared with other Dayak groups, the *Bemoyo* experience shows both similarities and unique characteristics. While the Iban have transformed *kuntao* into a performative art (Jiton et al., 2025), the *Bemoyo* have repurposed origin myths and *hutan tembawang* as symbols of historical continuity and territorial belonging. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a particularly clear test: when mobility was restricted, the community reverted to traditional knowledge of local food sources and strengthened social networks rooted in customary values. This demonstrates that resilience is not passive preservation but an active, creative process of cultural reinvention (Kuprii, 2024).

### ***Theoretical Contributions***

This research makes two main theoretical contributions. First, it enriches the literature on intangible cultural heritage by showing that ICH in small Dayak sub-ethnic groups is sustained through dynamic adaptation rather than rigid conservation, thus extending UNESCO’s (2020) framework. Second, it supports (Rogers Brubaker, 2006) critique of ethnicity as a fixed category by demonstrating how *Bemoyo* identity is fluid, context-dependent, and strategically mobilised through myths, landscape, and customary practices.

By focusing on a long historical period (1939–2025) and a relatively understudied sub-ethnic group, this study fills an important gap in West Kalimantan scholarship, which has been dominated by research on larger groups or short-term ethnographic studies .

### ***Practical Implications and Recommendations***

The findings have several practical implications. First, there is an urgent need for systematic documentation of *guru adat* knowledge, genealogies, and oral histories before this knowledge disappears with the older generation. Second, village history and *Bemoyo* cultural values should be integrated into local school curricula (*muatan lokal*) to strengthen cultural transmission among the youth. Third, community-based cultural tourism centred on *hutan tembawang*, ancestral graves, and traditional performing arts can be developed, provided it is managed with cultural sensitivity and community control. Fourth, village governments should allocate part of *Dana Desa* specifically for cultural preservation programmes. Finally, closer collaboration between universities, local government, and indigenous communities is essential to balance development goals with heritage protection.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

This study is a single-village case study relying heavily on oral sources from five key informants. While triangulation and member checking were rigorously applied, the findings cannot be generalised to all Dayak communities in West Kalimantan. Future research could compare the *Bemoyo* experience with other small sub-ethnic groups to provide a broader understanding of cultural resilience in Borneo.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has traced the historical evolution of Suti Semarang Village from its mythological origins in the *Semorongk–Siti* legend to its present form as a modern administrative village (1939–2025). It has shown how the *Dayak Bemoyo* community has continuously adapted to administrative reform, economic change, religious conversion, and the COVID-19 pandemic without severing its cultural roots.

The findings demonstrate that core *Bemoyo* elements — origin myths, *gotong royong*, *hutan tembawang* management, and ancestral veneration — have not disappeared but have been functionally transformed. What were once primarily practical and ritual practices have increasingly become symbolic resources for identity maintenance and social cohesion. This dynamic illustrates that intangible cultural heritage is sustained through adaptation and reinvention rather than rigid preservation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to broader debates on cultural resilience in Borneo by showing that even small sub-ethnic groups actively reinterpret tradition in response to external

pressures. It supports Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) notion of the invention of tradition and Connerton's (1989) concept of social memory as an active practice. By focusing on a long-term historical ethnography of the *Bemoyo*, this study fills a notable gap in West Kalimantan scholarship, which has largely overlooked smaller groups in favour of larger ethnic categories.

Despite its limitations as a single-village case study, this research highlights the importance of documenting local histories and customary knowledge before they fade. It calls for greater integration of indigenous perspectives into development planning and cultural policy. Ultimately, the story of Suti Semarang suggests that true cultural resilience lies not in resisting change, but in the community's capacity to remake tradition while preserving its essential meaning.

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