A Naming, Identity, and Ethnography: The Tatau Community in Sarawak's Tatau District

Calvin Jemarang

Punan National Association, Kuching, Sarawak
Corresponding author: calvinaj@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines the historical identity of the Tatau people in Sarawak, Borneo, challenging persistent misconceptions in both academic discourse and local narratives. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, genealogical records, and archival sources, it demonstrates that the Tatau constitute an indigenous Punan community with longstanding roots in the Tatau River basin. The analysis critiques the prevailing conflation of Tatau identity with the Rumah Jalong longhouse, revealing this association as a product of mid-twentieth-century Ibanisation and colonial-era administrative categorisation. By reconstructing territorial affiliations, kinship linkages, and migration histories, the paper argues that Tatau identity historically encompassed a broader network of settlements — including Murung Tuguong, Murung Data, and Murung Muput — extending beyond the demographic and symbolic reach of Rumah Jalong. It also foregrounds the region's multi-ethnic interactions, including longstanding relations with Melanau, Kanowit, Tanjong, and Berawan groups, thereby problematising assumptions of Iban cultural dominance. The study advocates for a more historically attuned and genealogically informed approach to the study of indigenous identity in Sarawak — one that accounts for the fluidity of ethnic categories, the politics of memory, and the contingent nature of community claims over time.

Keywords: Tatau identity; Punan communities; Ibanisation; Ethnic classification; Sarawak ethnohistory

INTRODUCTION

Names carry power. In colonial Sarawak, names were not merely identifiers; they became tools of control, categorisation, and economic extraction — including taxation. As such, they often distorted or oversimplified the complex realities of Indigenous communities. In the Tatau district, this was particularly evident, where histories of migration, intermarriage, and cultural exchange defied the rigid administrative labels imposed by colonial authorities. This paper explores how these authorities attempted to classify and govern the people of Tatau — a community with deep Punan roots and significant ties to neighbouring Melanau populations.

Tatau District lies inland along Sarawak's northern coast. It is a riverine region historically traversed by swidden agriculturalist Punan communities and settled Melanau populations. In academic literature, the Punan group central to this study is typically referred to as Punan Bah. However, I use Punan throughout, acknowledging that the term Punan Bah is both misleading and inappropriate. The Punan in this study are distinct from the formerly nomadic Punan or Pnan groups in the interior of Sarawak and Kalimantan described by scholars such as Bernard Sellato and Lars Kaskija. Unlike those groups, the Punan of Central Sarawak practised swidden agriculture and maintained longstanding ties to settled populations, particularly in the Belaga and Kakus river systems (see for examples Leach, 1950; Nicolaisen, 1976, 1977; Rousseau, 1990; Smith, 2023; Tillotson, 1994). Before Iban and Beketan migrations and colonial boundaries altered the region's demographic structure, these Punan communities engaged in intermarriage, trade, and shifting settlement with neighbouring Melanau (Anon, 1877, 1878). These entangled histories form the basis of the identity politics examined in this paper.

Colonial administrators, constrained by their need for categorisation and control, struggled to account for such complexity. The Brooke and later British administrations relied on ethnographic reports, censuses, and administrative classifications that rested on rigid assumptions: 'nomadic' versus 'settled,' 'primitive' versus 'civilised' ("Census [1947]," 1947; MacBryan, 1922; Noakes, 1950). For Tatau's people, whose origins defied easy classification — were they Punan, Melanau, or something distinct? — these frameworks proved inadequate.

The paper argues that colonial classification systems struggled to define the Tatau people adequately, given their mixed heritage rooted in Punan origins and historical interactions with Melanau communities. This ambiguity was not simply a colonial problem; it became a site of Indigenous agency. The Tatau community actively contested and strategically negotiated colonial naming practices, politicising their identity as a reflection of their unique history and resilience in the face of external control.

This paper asks four key questions: How did colonial administrations categorise the Tatau people, given their Punan ancestry and Melanau interactions? Did they lean towards one identity, invent a new label, or apply inconsistent classifications? What colonial assumptions about 'nomadic' versus 'settled' peoples influenced these efforts? How did the Tatau community respond to these labels, asserting their Punan roots, emphasising Melanau connections, or claiming a distinct Tatau identity? Finally, how did these dynamics shape identity politics during the colonial period?

And it is organised into five sections. Section 1 introduces the historical and conceptual framing for this study. Section 2 reviews existing literature on colonial governance in Sarawak, classification practices, Indigenous responses to colonialism, and the ethnohistory of the Tatau region. Section 3 outlines the methodology, including archival research, ethnohistorical analysis, and critical reading of colonial records. Section 4 presents the findings and discussion: first, reconstructing the historical context of Punan-Melanau interaction in Tatau; second, analysing colonial classification attempts; third, examining Indigenous responses; and fourth, considering the politics of layered identity. Finally, Section 5 concludes by summarising key findings, reflecting on their implications, and proposing directions for future research.

LITERARURE REVIEW

Names, ruins, and memories mark the Tatau. Scholarly research on the region remains sparse and uneven. While various local manuscripts and oral histories circulate informally, academic studies focusing specifically on the Tatau are limited. This review critically examines five major contributions to the field: Benedict Sandin (1970, 1980), Rafidah Abdullah (2020), Yumi Kato et al.(2017, 2020), Cramb and Dian (1979), and Ida Nicolaisen(1976, 1977). It identifies significant thematic concerns across this corpus — mortuary heritage, oral cosmology, demographic change, territorial memory, and classificatory politics — and highlights unresolved tensions that have perpetuated the ambiguity surrounding Tatau identity.

Following Brubaker's (2006)(2004) call to treat identity not as a fixed category but as a field of contested claims and practices, the review frames these studies as attempts to stabilise meaning across unstable historical terrain. The discussion proceeds thematically, while tracing the development of the field, and concludes by situating the present study within these debates.

Monuments remember what people forget. Rafidah Abdullah's (2020) Kajian Terhadap Tradisi Pengebumian Klirieng di Tatau represents the most focused study on the carved burial poles (klirieng) of the Tatau. Drawing on interviews, site visits, and archival records, Abdullah explores how klirieng encode cosmological beliefs, social hierarchy, and ancestral presence. Her work aligns with Connerton's (1989) argument that ritual and bodily practices carry memory, often more durably than text.

However, Abdullah's analysis treats ritual heritage as culturally bounded and internally coherent. Her framing of Rumah Jalong as representative of "the Tatau" elides a more fractured reality — one shaped by successive migrations, ritual discontinuities, and shifting claims to custodianship. In downplaying intra-group variation, she risks reifying what Brubaker (2004) would call a "groupist" vision of culture — one that imagines neatly bounded, homogenous communities rather than historically contingent, relational ones. That said, Abdullah does register the transformation of klirieng practice in recent decades. Her thesis hints, though does not elaborate, on how ritual re-enactment has become a mode of heritage recovery — a point that this study builds upon.

Snakes, spirits, and death shadow Tatau memory. Across Sandin (1970), Abdullah (2020), and Kato et al. (2017; 2020), mythic narratives of catastrophe structure oral histories. These accounts tell of forbidden flesh, tabooed animals, and the sudden collapse of ancestral settlements. In Sandin's retelling, it is the flesh of a great serpent that condemns a longhouse to extinction. In Kato et al., a similar tale emerges — centring on a caterpillar, a curse, and the deaths of children.

Such stories are not folklore in the reductive sense. They are memory's architecture. As Connerton (1989) and Hobsbawm (1992) argue, societies often preserve collective memory not through archives but through ritualised, embodied narrative. These motifs of loss function as explanatory devices: they locate contemporary absence within a moral framework of taboo and transgression. They also persist alongside epidemiological accounts — such as the smallpox outbreaks in the Selitut and Maing rivers noted by Kedit and Chang (2005) — thereby operating on multiple registers of causality. Crucially, these cosmologies help communities make sense of demographic rupture without recourse to colonial or biomedical frameworks of understanding.

Rivers move; so do identities. Sandin (1970) identifies six Tatau subgroups historically tied to distinct tributaries — Murung Tugang, Murung Kakus, and others. By the late twentieth century, widespread intermarriage with Iban, Beketan, Punan, and Malay communities had transformed the demographic landscape. "About 90%," he writes, "had married the peoples of other races in the Anap sub-district" (Sandin, 1970, p. 2). This claim is substantiated by Kato et al. (2017), whose ethnographic data confirm the growing heterogeneity of cultural practice and ancestry.

Such transformations are not merely demographic. They are classificatory. As Brubaker (2004) and Clifford (1997) emphasise, identity categories are not simply inherited — they are claimed, negotiated, and imposed. Cramb and Dian (1979) observe that ritual systems once distinctive to the Tatau were increasingly replaced with Iban or Punan forms, suggesting that identity became performative as much as genealogical. Nicolaisen (1977) proposed a linguistic link between Tatau and Melanau, though she later questioned this connection (pers. comm., 2019). These shifts reflect both historical intermixture and political pressures to conform to recognisable ethnic categories — often as a condition for land rights, religious recognition, or state support.

The land remembers. Material residues such as klirieng, fruit trees, and named sites (ugan) function as mnemonic anchors. Sandin (1970) and Kato et al. (2020) both document ancestral sites marked by klirieng and salong, many of which are still referenced in local genealogies. For many descendants, these sites are not archaeological ruins. They are living evidence — invoked in ritual, invoked in memory, and sometimes, invoked in court.

These spatial markers serve as what Connerton (1989) terms "inscribed surfaces of memory." They link contemporary communities to ancestral claims through material continuity. Kato et al. (2017) note that these mnemonic geographies are regularly used to establish genealogical legitimacy, particularly in contexts of land negotiation. This practice foregrounds what Clifford (1988) calls "routes" over "roots" — where mobility, reoccupation, and renaming form part of how territorial identity is constituted. In Tatau, land is not only the object of memory; it is also its medium.

Names do not stand still. The term "Tatau" has functioned variably as a place-name, ethnonym, and administrative category. Abdullah (2020) tends to treat it as a stable cultural signifier, implicitly equating the contemporary Rumah Jalong community with the historic Tatau. This flattening of temporal and genealogical difference reveals the classificatory violence embedded in colonial and postcolonial ethnography.

Sandin (1970) similarly assumes a unified Tatau identity, though his data derives largely from Rumah Diman Jarap — a community already shaped by Ibanisation. Terms like "Murung Tugong," which Sandin misreads as personal names, were in fact place-names (murung meaning "stream"), wrongly converted into lineal ancestors. This narrative compression reflects a broader problem: the urge to tidy up ethnographic complexity into neat tribal histories. As Brubaker (2004) argues, ethnic labels are often reified by the very bureaucracies and disciplines that seek to study them. Kato et al. (2020) demonstrate how labels like "Punan Bah" — once colonial artefacts — are now actively claimed or rejected depending on context. These dynamics show that classification is not neutral; it is always political.

Benedict Sandin's The Tatau People of the Kakus and Anap Rivers (1970) remains foundational but flawed. His effort to reconstruct Tatau history through oral tradition, genealogy, and place-names was pioneering for its time. But it reveals the limits of working within an Ibanised classificatory schema. Sandin's dependence on a small number of informants, drawn from culturally hybrid communities, colours his conclusions. His work reflects what Hobsbawm (1983) called the "invention of tradition" — the process by which fluid and complex social practices are codified into seemingly ancient, unitary forms.

This is evident in his misinterpretation of murung as personal rather than spatial, a mistake that reappears in Abdullah (2020). Such errors matter not because they are factual lapses, but because they shape how identity is later mobilised — in land claims, cultural festivals, and historical writing. Sandin's version of Tatau history has become the orthodoxy against which others must now position themselves. The politics of memory transmission, as Connerton and Clifford show, involve asymmetries of narrative power. This study challenges that orthodoxy by reassembling fragmented memories, buried names, and marginalised sites into a more layered account.

Despite important contributions by Sandin, Abdullah, Kato, Nicolaisen, and others, the literature remains partial and uneven. Four critical gaps emerge: (1) a lack of attention to intra-Tatau differentiation; (2) the conflation of place-names with personhood in oral traditions; (3) insufficient theorisation of classification as a political process; and (4) limited synthesis across ethnographic, linguistic, and material sources. These weaknesses reflect what Brubaker (2004) warns against — treating identities as fixed rather than fluid, as given rather than contested.

This study addresses those gaps by integrating oral histories, genealogical reconstructions, and material site surveys to map how Tatau identity has been historically constructed, occluded, and reclaimed. It builds on but also critiques earlier work, foregrounding how ritual authority, mnemonic landscapes, and shifting classifications interact in the ongoing politics of recognition. In so doing, it contributes to broader debates on identity, memory, and indigeneity in postcolonial Borneo..

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, historically grounded ethnographic approach to trace shifts in Tatau cultural practices, language use, and identity formation. Fieldwork, conducted intermittently from 2003 to 2025, followed a longitudinal design that enabled deep engagement with kinship networks, ritual knowledge, and personal histories. Primary data were drawn from unstructured interviews with elders, community leaders, and fluent Tatau speakers, alongside focus group discussions across generations in key settlements: Rumah Ado, Rumah Arjey, Rumah Jalong, and Rumah Sylvester Bunsu (Figure 4, 5). These dialogues revealed contested meanings around identity, memory, and linguistic loss. Purposive and snowball sampling ensured broad representation across age, gender, dialect proficiency, and lineage.

Oral histories were contextualised through archival sources—colonial records, missionary accounts, and family-held documents. Site visits to klirieng, caves, and abandoned longhouses anchored narratives spatially, tying memory to territory and ritual obligation. Genealogical mapping clarified patterns of descent, inheritance, and intergenerational language transmission. Analysis followed an iterative, thematic process, guided by a hermeneutic sensitivity to how memory is shaped by positionality, authority, and transmission (Connerton 1989; Clifford 1988). Triangulation and member checking strengthened interpretive reliability and addressed gaps in recall and documentation.

Ethical practice combined formal consent procedures with customary norms of reciprocity. Findings were returned to participants and discussed with local leaders to ensure transparency and accountability. The aim is not merely descriptive but interpretive: to foreground subaltern epistemologies, interrogate colonial frames, and situate identity within the politics of memory and interethnic encounter.

This research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Sarawak's colonial history and Indigenous ethnohistory. It offers a focused account of the Tatau community's identity politics under colonial rule, illuminating the underexamined relationship between Punan and Melanau groups. In particular, it highlights how colonial naming practices—far from neutral—both reflected and reshaped the identities they claimed to categorise.

Rather than reproduce fixed typologies, this paper traces how Punan memory, ritual practice, and territorial claims evolved through frontier dynamics and political rupture. It shifts the analytical lens from classificatory stability to processual identity-making, foregrounding the interplay of oral transmission, mnemonic authority, and historical contingency.

Tatau identity, in this frame, is not a fixed ethnic essence. It is a relational and historically situated process, shaped by classificatory regimes, political shifts, and memory work. Following Brubaker's (2006) critique of groupism, this study treats 'Tatau' as a category of practice—variously functioning as geographical reference, administrative label, and lived identity. These shifts do not mark confusion but expose the fluid terrain of ethnic naming in Borneo.

Clifford's (1986) concept of "partial truths" frames identity as positional and contingent. Tatau, from this perspective, emerges as a layered formation—shaped by colonial archives, oral traditions, and genealogical claims that overlap and occasionally contradict. Fabian's (1983) critique of the "ethnographic present" further challenges static representations. Rather than anchoring labels in time, this analysis

explores how communities contest, rework, and strategically mobilise identity in shifting historical contexts.

Memory, in this view, is not passive inheritance. It is a social and ethical practice (Lambek 1996): a means of legitimising belonging, asserting place, and negotiating recognition. Identity becomes a form of memory work—situated, strategic, and emotionally charged. These orientations frame the three-part analysis that follows: beginning with the layered semantics of Tatow, Taytow, and Tatau; moving to the rise of Tatau tulin as a longhouse identity; and concluding with the contestation of ritual and historical authority in the Tatau basin.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Fluid Labels, Fixed Identities: The Historical Semantics Of Tatau

'Tatau', like the cases Metcalf studied in Baram, resists simple classification. "Ethnicity," he reminds us, "is an object of research, not a preliminary to it. A mere list of proper names makes no sense without an understanding of the nature of longhouses … their communal politics, and the pattern of trade that linked them together" (Metcalf, 2010, p. 28). Tatau may look like a proper name, but it cannot — as Sandin and others presumed — be taken uncritically as an ethnic category. Such assumptions skip over the actual work of interpretation. Without understanding the community's structure, political life, and economic ties, the label obscures more than it reveals.

Tributary Logics and the Name Tatow

The Punan were known to the Brunei court, not only through contact but also through intermarriage and political subordination as subjects (see Figure 2). However, they did not appear in Brunei records under a single ethnonym. Instead, they were identified by at least three different names — each corresponding to the rivers they inhabited. In Borneo, names often travelled through tributary systems rather than along ethnographic or tribal lines. In Brunei-era sources, "Tatow" functions not as an ethnic label but as a geographic signifier (Moor, 1839, p. 133). As early as 1839, Tatow referred to communities dwelling along the Tatau River, likely named for their location rather than their ritual or genealogical status. Within Brunei's administrative logic, such naming was pragmatic: affiliation with a river — rather than precise ethnic origin — was sufficient for the purposes of tribute, taxation, and allegiance. Orang Tatow, in this sense, simply denoted "people of the Tatau River," irrespective of internal cultural or genealogical distinctions.

This Brunei logic of identification prioritised place over identity. Tatow was a category of location within a fluid tributary world, not an assertion of ethnic boundary. The act of naming, in Brubaker's (2004) terms, was a category of practice — a functional designation tied to administrative utility rather than cultural essence.

Documentary evidence supports this reading. Personal genealogical manuscripts , Native Court records, and archival materials accessed through the generosity of Penghulu Awang Dewa bin Awang Tajuddin and his kin confirm that Tatow referred specifically to a Punan lineage. These sources trace the early leaders of the Tatau region to a prominent ancestor named Saghe'. His descendants — including Paso and Orang Kaya Saghieng (or Saging) — maintained strong ties with the Brunei court. Paso married a Brunei noblewoman, Uzong Tijah. Saghieng travelled to Brunei, where he was not only pardoned but also rewarded (refer Figure 2). These encounters suggest the lineage was not just known to Brunei but actively drawn into its tributary network.

Colonial Codification and the Emergence of Tatau

With the advent of Brooke rule, naming conventions shifted. The term Tatau began to circulate in colonial censuses and administrative reports, taking on the form of an ethnic label. In 1887, Brooke officer Q.A. Buck, for example, distinguished Tatau from the Punan in his census of the Tatau population (Buck 1887). In contrast to Brunei's fluid pragmatics, Brooke-era governance favoured fixed categories. Identity became not just a tool of enumeration, but an instrument of control — essential for regulating trade, administering justice, managing labour, and shaping territorial policy. The term Tatau, once a geographic descriptor, hardened into an ethnonym — a transformation reinforced by the language of censuses, border patrols, and tax records.

The classificatory distinction did not remain stable for long. Under the Interpretation Ordinance of 1933, colonial authorities reabsorbed Tatau into the broader ethnic category Punan (Brooke, 1933). The move marked a shift in administrative logic: from distinguishing subgroups for local governance to consolidating identities for bureaucratic coherence and policy uniformity across the colony. Post-war ethnographies entrenched this fixity even further. Sandin (1970, 1980), Nicolaisen (1976, 1977), and Kato et al. (2017, 2020) routinely treated Tatau as a bounded group, seldom interrogating the term's layered past. As their accounts became canonical, they flattened earlier nuances. The name Tatau thus emerged as a tool of administrative legibility, obscuring both earlier self-descriptions and the more porous affiliations of Brunei's tributary world.

Linguistic usage shifted accordingly. Linou Tatau — "Tatau people" — was once a fluid expression of river-based affiliation, not a claim to bounded ethnicity. Over time, however, it came to be read as evidence of a distinct ethnolinguistic group, reinforcing the colonial project of fixing identities into legible categories.

A separate but related development emerged in the late 20th century with the rise of the term Orang Ulu. Coined as a political umbrella category, Orang Ulu brought together various upriver communities of interior Sarawak — including Kenyah, Kayan, and some Punan groups — under a shared label. Though sometimes retrospectively applied to groups like those at Rumah Jalong (Abdullah, 2020, p. 47), the term had no currency during the colonial period. Its emergence was shaped not by colonial ethnography but by post-independence political movements, most notably the formation of the Orang Ulu National Association (OUNA) in the 1960s and 1970s (Metcalf, 2010, pp. 20, 78). These shifts — from Linou Tatau to Tatau as ethnonym, and from local designations to Orang Ulu as regional identity — reflect broader changes in how identity was articulated, categorised, and mobilised over time.

Genealogical Memory and the Endurance of Taytow

Oral tradition offers a counterpoint to both tributary pragmatism and colonial codification. Within Punan genealogies, the term Taytow continues to circulate — not as an imposed name, but as a self-referential claim to river-based belonging and ancestral descent. Leaders such as Pemancha Kupa Kanyan and Tr Bilong Keseng refer to Taytow to describe the descendants of Saghe', whose lineage has long been tied to the Tatau River. This usage is not nostalgic; it reflects a living mode of identity that persists in speech, ceremony, and social memory — particularly in longhouses like Rumah Ado Bilong (see Figure 5).

This genealogical strand underscores Clifford's (1986) insight that all identity claims are "partial truths" — shaped by positionality, narration, and historical circumstance. Taytow, as a term, captures a kin-based understanding of belonging that neither the Brunei label Tatow nor the colonial construct Tatau can fully contain. Rather than signalling separate communities, these names represent overlapping registers of recognition.

My own fieldwork confirms this fluidity. In both rural Sarawak and urban Kuala Lumpur, everyday introductions rarely began with "what ethnicity are you?" but rather with "kamu orang mana?" — where are you from? Answers typically invoked rivers, longhouses, or districts before broader categories. A Kenyah friend might say "Orang Belaga" long before identifying as Orang Ulu. When I replied "Punan," there was often a pause — then a nod of contingent recognition, shaped by shared assumptions about place, language, and indigeneity.

Colonial records echo this ambiguity. The term Punan was variously applied — sometimes narrowly, to Rejang and Tatau groups (Roth, 1896, p. 37), and at other times more broadly, to mobile riverine peoples across Borneo (Holmsen, 2006; Kaskija, 2012; Sellato, 2002). For the Punan of Tatau, it made sense to be known outwardly as Orang Tatau, while internally maintaining genealogical and ritual continuity with the wider Punan network.

Tatow, Taytow, and Tatau are not interchangeable labels for a singular identity. Nor do they represent distinct communities. Each emerged within a particular system of recognition: tributary diplomacy, colonial taxonomy, or genealogical narration. The name Tatow functioned within Brunei's riverine logic of rule; Taytow lives on in kin memory; Tatau arose through administrative simplification. To read these terms as synonyms is to erase the contexts that produced them. To attend to their differences is to grasp the historical processes through which communities like the Punan Tatau have been named, known, and at times misrecognised.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Tatow, as used in Brunei-era sources, referred to the river-based Punan community associated with Saghe' and his descendants. These individuals are remembered in Punan genealogies as Taytow, and their identity was later formalised under the term Tatau in colonial administrative records. Notably, their descendants continue to reside in the Kakus region today, particularly in longhouses such as Rumah Ado Bilong. The variation in naming does not signal the existence of distinct communities, but rather reflects the layered and shifting registers through which identity has historically been recorded and interpreted — whether through courtly tribute systems, colonial categorisations, ethnographic writing, or Indigenous oral tradition.

Rather than resolving this variation into a single fixed meaning, it may be more accurate — and more historically responsible — to understand these names as windows into the contexts that produced them. Tatow was functional for Brunei administrators; Taytow remains meaningful in local genealogical memory; Tatau emerged from a colonial classificatory imperative. Each carries weight, but each also flattens other dimensions. Attending to these layers allows us not only to clarify who the Tatow were, but also to better understand the processes through which communities like the Punan Tatau have been named, recognised, and sometimes misrecognised over time.

The Emergence Of 'Tatau' As A Longhouse Identity: Rumah Jalong, Rumah Sadap, And Rumah Sylvester Bunsu

Amid the shifting meanings of Tatow, Tatau, and Taytow—from tributary node to census category—certain longhouse communities have anchored themselves in the term Tatau as a living, evolving identity. This section examines how Rumah Jalong, Rumah Sadap, and Rumah Sylvester Bunsu invoke Tatau tulin ("true Tatau") not as a static inheritance, but as a claim actively sustained through practice, memory, and negotiation.

These assertions emerge not in spite of demographic flux, but through it. Though now predominantly Iban in composition, these longhouses maintain their Tatau identity through ritual continuity, oral genealogies, leadership succession, and kinship ties. Their persistence reflects not a quest for genealogical purity, but an adaptive rootedness in response to historical disruption. Leaders such as

Diman Jarap played a crucial role in this process, maintaining links to an older political identity even as the social landscape changed.

Each community illustrates how Tatau became politically useful. Present-day Rumah Jalong traces its origin to a community founded by Gelimang in the late 19th century. Around 1883, when Nyipa was appointed penghulu, he relocated the community slightly downriver to the Jatan River, nearer the administrative centre (Gueritz, 1884). Gelimang, who had been in dispute with Nyipa—particularly over access to birdnest caves in Kakus (Low, 1875), sought to maintain his community's autonomy. The dispute went to court, where Gelimang prevailed. Despite this, Nyipa retained considerable political power, using his new position as penghulu to reassert control over the birdnest caves. Although related by blood, the dispute led to Gelimang's departure from Nyipa, and he moved his followers to the Buan River.

Unable to attract many Punan followers, Gelimang's community became a mixed Punan-Iban longhouse. This was the earliest known community of its kind in the Tatau basin, but it did not survive beyond Gelimang's death in the early 20th century. Gelimang passed away several years before Nyipa, who died in 1909 (Owen, 1909). Following Gelimang's death, most of the Punan in his community relocated to Kakus, where the Punan had long been confined. Nyipa himself moved to Kakus around 1894, and his former longhouse at Jatan was converted into quarters for government officials.

The Iban faction of Rumah Gelimang, however, was barred from the Kakus River. Instead, during this period, Sarek—whose lineage connected him to the Sibiew River—persuaded the Iban to remain in the Buan-Belak area, which had been abandoned by the Punan. Diman Jarap, Gelimang's grandson, supported Sarek and later succeeded him. It was through this connection that Diman, in turn, asserted the community's "Tatau asli" (original Tatau) identity—despite the now overwhelming Iban composition of the community and his own marriage to an Iban woman (Muda, 2010; Sidi, 2017). This assertion of "Tatau tulin," which later became identified as "Tatau tulin" by the Jalong, strategically linked the community to the klirieng at Rantau Belak, thus preserving ritual associations with the Punan while accommodating the growing Iban majority.

Similarly, Rumah Sadap, established by Sadap Anggat—Jalong Anyik's nephew—mirrors this trajectory. Rumah Sylvester Bunsu, founded by Ganyun Mok's descendants, relocated to Kakus with the consent of Punan headman Bilong Keseng, navigating both administrative directives and strategic alliances. What these communities share is not a singular ethnic essence but a mode of positionality. Their self-identification as Tatau reflects a conscious engagement with institutional legibility—using historical labels to claim recognition, land rights, and cultural legitimacy in contemporary Malaysia. Rather than challenging their authenticity, these claims illustrate how identity is made resilient: through performance, narration, and alignment with older labels reinterpreted to meet present needs.

In this light, Tatau is not a residue of colonial naming. It is a living framework through which longhouse communities assert belonging, continuity, and visibility in a landscape still structured by historical categories of recognition.

Claiming 'Tatau Tulin': Memory, Identity, And The Social Life Of Historical Claims

Ethnic and territorial identities in Borneo's frontier zones have never been stable inheritances. They are continuously reconfigured across generations—shaped by migration, intermarriage, shifting administrative boundaries, and evolving claims to cultural legitimacy. This dynamic is particularly salient among longhouse communities such as Rumah Jalong, Rumah Sadap, and Rumah Sylvester Bunsu, which continue to articulate themselves as Tatau tulin, or "true Tatau." While these assertions gained greater clarity in the mid-twentieth century, especially under the leadership of figures such as Tuai Rumah Diman Jarap, their significance lies not in unbroken descent but in the social work they perform.

As Connerton (1989) argues, memory operates less as a static archive than as a socially embedded practice—one through which communities negotiate continuity amid rupture. Within this framework, Tatau functions not merely as an ethnonym but as a flexible idiom of belonging: a rhetorical and cultural assertion of rootedness in the face of demographic transformation and political marginalisation.

Although many residents now identify linguistically and ethnically as Iban, the designation Tatau tulin remains central to collective self-understanding. Its endurance suggests that the term's value lies not in strict genealogical lineage but in its capacity to symbolise authority, presence, and legitimacy. As Hobsbawm (1983) reminds us, traditions often emerge in response to historical dislocation—serving to anchor communities in times of uncertainty. In this light, Tatau tulin is better read as a performative claim than as an empirical descriptor: a way of reconstructing coherence from fragmented historical threads.

It was not always so coherent. The legacy of Saghe' did not yield a single, unbroken line of ritual authority. Rather, it fractured. After the deaths of Banun, Nyipa, and Siki, leadership among the descendants of Saghe' became contested. The absence of clear succession and the fragmentation of klirieng authority led to competing genealogical narratives. These fractures, rather than discrediting claims to Tatau tulin, opened space for their reinvention. As later longhouses such as Rumah Jalong asserted ties to Gelimang and Rantau Belak, they did so not only by appealing to ancestry but by strategically reassembling fragments of ritual history. In this context, identity was not inherited intact but reconstituted in moments of uncertainty—performed through narratives, ceremonies, and claims to klirieng custodianship.

Colonial governance amplified these dynamics by institutionalising ethnic boundaries that often obscured local complexity. As Li (2000) and Brosius (1992) have shown, colonial administrators in Borneo imposed rigid distinctions between 'nomadic' and 'settled' populations, privileging the latter as legible and governable. These categories, far from neutral, carried material consequences—denying certain groups land rights and political recognition. In the Tatau region, this logic shaped access to land in places like the Kakus headwaters, where residence and resource rights were contingent upon being officially classified as 'Punan.' Yet such administrative labels frequently masked far more entangled histories of alliance, mobility, and shared ancestry.

The example of Rumah Sylvester Bunsu illustrates this complexity. Although today it is regarded as an Iban longhouse, historical settlement was permitted only through endorsement by Punan leaders—a reminder that local legitimacy has often depended less on formal classification than on negotiated relationships. Within such a context, the invocation of Tatau tulin must be understood as a response to the classificatory violence of colonial and postcolonial statecraft: an effort to reclaim identity and place within an imposed hierarchy of indigeneity.

Against this backdrop, Abdullah's (2020) analysis of klirieng culture, based primarily on data from the Rumah Jalong community, warrants further contextualisation. While her account provides valuable insight into contemporary engagements with ritual and cultural heritage, it also highlights the interpretive tensions that arise when symbolic affiliation is treated as equivalent to cultural transmission. Her own data reveal that Rumah Jalong, founded only in the early twentieth century, retains limited knowledge of the ritual and genealogical functions historically associated with klirieng. Nonetheless, the community is presented as a primary inheritor of this tradition.

This interpretive slippage becomes more pronounced in the discussion of social stratification. Abdullah records the existence of four social categories: maren (aristocrats), aweh (intermediate class), rakyat biasa (commoners), and ulun (bondspeople or slaves) (Abdullah 2020, p. 73). However, both maren and ulun are terms historically associated with Kayan and Kenyah societies in Central and Northern Borneo (Rousseau, 1974, 1979). In contrast, earlier sources from the Tatau region—such as Jarap (1961) and Saad (1971), which Abdullah herself cites—refer instead to a different classificatory system: Tengelan

(aristocrat) and Melagi. Well, these two also the terms used by Punan in their stratification Panyin, and Lipen. These older terms, used by the Punan and their neighbours, reflect a distinct logic of social organisation, tied to different ritual and political structures.

This is not to suggest an oversight, but to highlight how interethnic contact and broader regional influences may have shaped the classificatory language adopted by later generations at Rumah Jalong. Such shifts are to be expected in communities navigating dynamic historical terrains. Yet they also underscore the importance of distinguishing between inherited terms and those introduced or reinterpreted in the context of shifting sociopolitical landscapes—particularly when such terms inform broader arguments about ritual continuity and ancestral authority.

Indeed, had Abdullah extended her ethnographic engagement to include Punan communities in the Kakus—whose links to Tatau she acknowledges—a more historically grounded interpretation of klirieng might have emerged. Among these groups, klirieng serve four primary functions: as tanom Tengelan (mausolea for aristocrats), tada' baliu (territorial markers), tada' uba' or selita' (carriers of ancestral narrative), and lasan pesupa (ritual oath sites in land and kinship disputes). These are not merely symbolic forms—they represent embedded practices of memory, law, and place-making.

It may appear ironic that the terminological distinctions discussed here were already available in the references Abdullah engages. Both Jarap (1961) and Saad (1971), included in her bibliography, document the use of Tengelan and Melagi as designations for aristocratic and intermediary classes, respectively—terminology that predates and differs from the Kayan-Kenyah lexicon employed in her study. This is not a question of fidelity to the archive, but of interpretation: how one reads available sources in light of historical specificity and ethnographic complexity.

Ultimately, the concept of Tatau tulin must be understood not as a fixed ethnic inheritance but as a mode of historical and political engagement. It reflects not a seamless continuity but a repertoire of symbolic resources through which communities make sense of their position in shifting political landscapes. These claims to being Tatau tulin are acts of memory work: situated efforts to articulate legitimacy, rootedness, and cultural authority in a world where the ground beneath identity is often anything but firm.

CONCLUSION

The historical identity of the Tatau people cannot be contained within the administrative shorthand of colonial ethnography or the cultural flattening of postcolonial nation-building. This study has revisited that identity by drawing together genealogies, oral histories, and archival traces to reconstruct a more layered past—one in which the Tatau emerge not as recent arrivals, as Tillotson (1994) suggested, but as an indigenous community with deep ancestral and ritual ties to the Tatau River basin.

Their story is not only embedded in places like Murung Tuguong, Murung Data, and Murung Baliu, but also in the social fabric woven through kinship with Punan, Melanau, Kajang, and other riverine groups. That fabric has been strained, not erased, by waves of migration, intermarriage, and bureaucratic reclassification.

One of this paper's central interventions has been to problematise the treatment of Rumah Jalong as the archetype of Tatau identity. While it plays a visible role today in regional ritual life, its demographic and cultural profile reflects significant Ibanisation—part of a wider pattern of assimilation that masks older ethnohistorical trajectories. The consequence has been a strategic reworking of memory, one in which Tatau tulin is not a genealogical truth but a symbolic and political assertion.

In challenging the notion that Tatau identity is simply a variant of Iban-ness, this paper points instead to a complex history of interethnic entanglement and ritual autonomy. These findings unsettle dominant narratives and urge a more situated reading of identity—one that privileges lived experience, memory work, and place-based affiliations over reductive categories.

As one elder dryly observed, in Punan:

"Taytow kayto, 'Tatau' ka kopat. Na, 'Tatau' lan si to ro."

"We say Taytow, they say Tatau. And now, we've all become 'Tatau' — that is, we've all become 'silly.'"

His irony cuts to the core of the problem: when external labels harden into official truths, they can obscure more than they reveal. But his humour also offers a clue to survival — to how communities like those in Tatau negotiate identity not through fixed categories but through adaptability, wit, and historical consciousness.

Reclaiming these histories, then, is not just an academic gesture. It is a refusal to be spoken for. It is an invitation to listen more carefully — to what names meant, to how they changed, and to what they still carry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Abdullah, R. (2020). *Kajian terhadap tradisi pengebumian Klirieng di Tatau, Sarawak dari perspektif etnoarkeologi* [Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris]. http://ir.upsi.edu.my//detailsg.php?det=5011

Anon. (1877, November 1). Bintulu November 1, 1877 (Sungan, Paso). Sarawak Gazette, 78–79.

Anon. (1878, January 22). Bintulu January 22, 1878 (Orang Kaya Saghieng). Sarawak Gazette, 8.

Bilong, A. (2022). Cerita Tengelan Punan Tatau [Unpublished manuscript].

Brooke, B. W. D. (1933, July 1). Order No. I-1 (Interpretation) 1933 2 (XV) Schedule. Sarawak Government Gazette.

Brosius, J. P. (1992). *The axiological presence of death: Penan Gang death-names.* (Volumes I and II). [PhD Thesis, University of Michigan]. https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/128921

Census [1947]. (1947, July 2). Sarawak Gazette, 123–124.

Clifford, J. (1988). *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art.* Harvard University Press.

Connerton, P. (1989). How Societies Remember. Cambridge University Press.

Cramb, R. A., & Dian, J. (1979). *A social and economic survey of the Bintulu extension region* (Agriculture Report 8; National Extension Project Baseline Study, Issue 8, p. 46). Planning Division, Department of Agriculture Sarawak.

Gueritz, G. (1884, February 1). Bintulu Monthly Report October 1883 (Nyipa made Penghulu). Sarawak Gazette, 6.

Hobsbawm, E. J. (1992). Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality. Cambridge university press. https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=-MycJ9mCn14C&oi=fnd&pg=PP9&dq=Eric+Hobsbawm+(1983)+-+Nations+and+Nationalism+since+1780&ots=HHJH-PDX85&sig=6IVshh6GfacsZYFzk7YdpDGlPBE

Holmsen, K. (2006*). Out of the Forest and Into the Market: Social and Economic Transformations in a Bornean Foraging Society* [The University of Arizona.]. https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/196088

James Clifford. (1997). Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century. Harvard University Press.

James Clifford & George E. Marcus. (1986*). Introduction: Partial Truths. In In Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (pp. 1–26). University of California Press.

Jarap, D. (1961). *Hikayat Orang Tatau* (Mohd. S. Mutas Khan, Trans.). In Bintulu Centenary 1861-1961.

Kaskija, L. (2012). *Images of a Forest People: Punan Malinau — Identity, Sociality, and Encapsulation in Borneo.* Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology 52. Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, 28, 366. https://doi.org/10.1355/sj28-2k

Kato, Y., Langub, J., Abdullah, A. R., Samejima, H., Soda, R., Uchibori, M., Okuno, K., & Ishikawa, N. (2020). Multiethnic Society of Central Sarawak: An Ethnographic Analysis. In Anthropogenic Tropical Forests (pp. 85–109). Springer.

Kato, Y., Samejima, H., & Ichikawa, M. (2017). Trans-river Migration of Iban and Bekatan to the Tatau River Basin in Bintulu. Ngingit, 10.

Kedit, P. M., & Chang, W. S. (Eds.). (2005). Peoples of the planted forest. Forest Department Sarawak.

Leach, E. R. (1950). *Social Science Research in Sarawak:* A Report on the Possibilities of a Social Economic Survey of Sarawak Presented to the Colonial Social Science Research Council, London, March 1948-July 1949. HM Stationery Office.

Li, T. M. (2000). *Articulating indigenous identity in Indonesia: Resource politics and the tribal slot*. Comparative Studies in Society and History, 42(1), 149–179.

Low, H. B. (1875, August 2). Bintulu Report July 1875 (Sarang Bekuyat). Sarawak Gazette.

MacBryan, G. T. M. (1922, August 1). Census of the Balui. Sarawak Gazette, 192.

Metcalf, P. (2010). *The life of the longhouse: An archaeology of ethnicity*. Cambridge University Press.

Moor, J. H. (Ed.). (1839). Art. II. Notices of the city of Borneo and its inhabitants made during the voyage of the American brig Himmaleh in the Indian Archipelago, in 1837. In The Chinese Repository Vol. VII: From May 1838 to April 1839: Vol. Vol. VII (pp. 121–135). The Proprietors.

Muda, M. (2010, April 11). Orang Tatau: Kaum di ambang kepupusan, tinggal lapan orang masih berdarah Tatau tulen. Berita Harian.

Nicolaisen, I. (1976). *Form and Function on Punan Bah Ethno-historical Tradition*. Sarawak (The) Museum Journal Sarawak, 24(45), Article 45.

Nicolaisen, I. (1977). *The dynamics of ethnic classification: A case study of the Punan Bah in Sarawak*. Folk. Dansk Ethnografisk Tidsskrift Kobenhavn, 19, 183–200.

Noakes, J. L. (1950). A Report on the 1947 Population Census [Population census]. Government Printing Office.

Owen, H. L. (1909, October 1). Bintulu Monthly Report August 1909 (Nyipa Died). Sarawak Gazette, 210.

Rogers Brubaker. (2006). Ethnicity without Groups. Harvard University Press.

Roth, H. L. (1896*). Natives Of Sarawak And British North Borneo* (vol. I): Vol. I. Truslove & Comba. http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.48105

Rousseau, J. (1974). The Social Organization of the Baluy Kayan [PhD Thesis]. University of Cambridge.

Rousseau, J. (1979). Kayan Stratification. Man, 14(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.2307/2801564

Rousseau, J. (1990). Central Borneo: Ethnic identity and social life in a stratified society. Oxford University Press.

Saad, I. (Ed.). (1971). Bintulu Di Dalam Kenangan. Biro Kesusasteraan Borneo.

Salasilah Keturunan Raja2 Brunei Di—Sarawak. (1982, Disember). Jabatan Pusat Sejarah, Bandar Seri Begawan, Negara Brunei Darussalam.

Sandin, B. (1970). *The Tatau People of the Kakus and Anap Rivers, Fourth Division, Sarawak*. Sarawak Museum Journal, Vol. VXIII, Nos 36-37 (New Series)(December 1970), 162–164.

Sandin, B. (1980). *The Living Legends: Borneans Telling Their Tales.* Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Malaysia, Cawangan Sarawak, Kementerian Pelajaran, Malaysia.

Sellato, B. (2002). Innermost Borneo: Studies in Dayak cultures. NUS Press.

Sidi, K. (2017, June 1*). Etnik Sarawak diancam kepupusan*. Berita Harian. https://www.bharian.com.my/taxonomy/term/1303/2017/07/288508/etnik-sarawak-diancam-kepupusan

Smith, A. D. (2023). *Linguistic approaches to reconstructing human history and the exodus of Punan from Sarawak, Malaysia.* Unpublished Manuscript, 43.

Tillotson, D. M. (1994). *Who Invented The Dayak? Historical Case Studies in Art, Material Culture and Ethnic Identity from Borneo* [PhD Thesis, Australian National University]. http://hdl.handle.net/1885/116158

APPPENDIX

FIGURE 1: Ganyun Anak Mok, accompanied by the Tatau District Office, visited the klirieng site at Rantau Belak on 5 April 2010. (Photo courtesy of Sylvester Bunsu Ganyun)
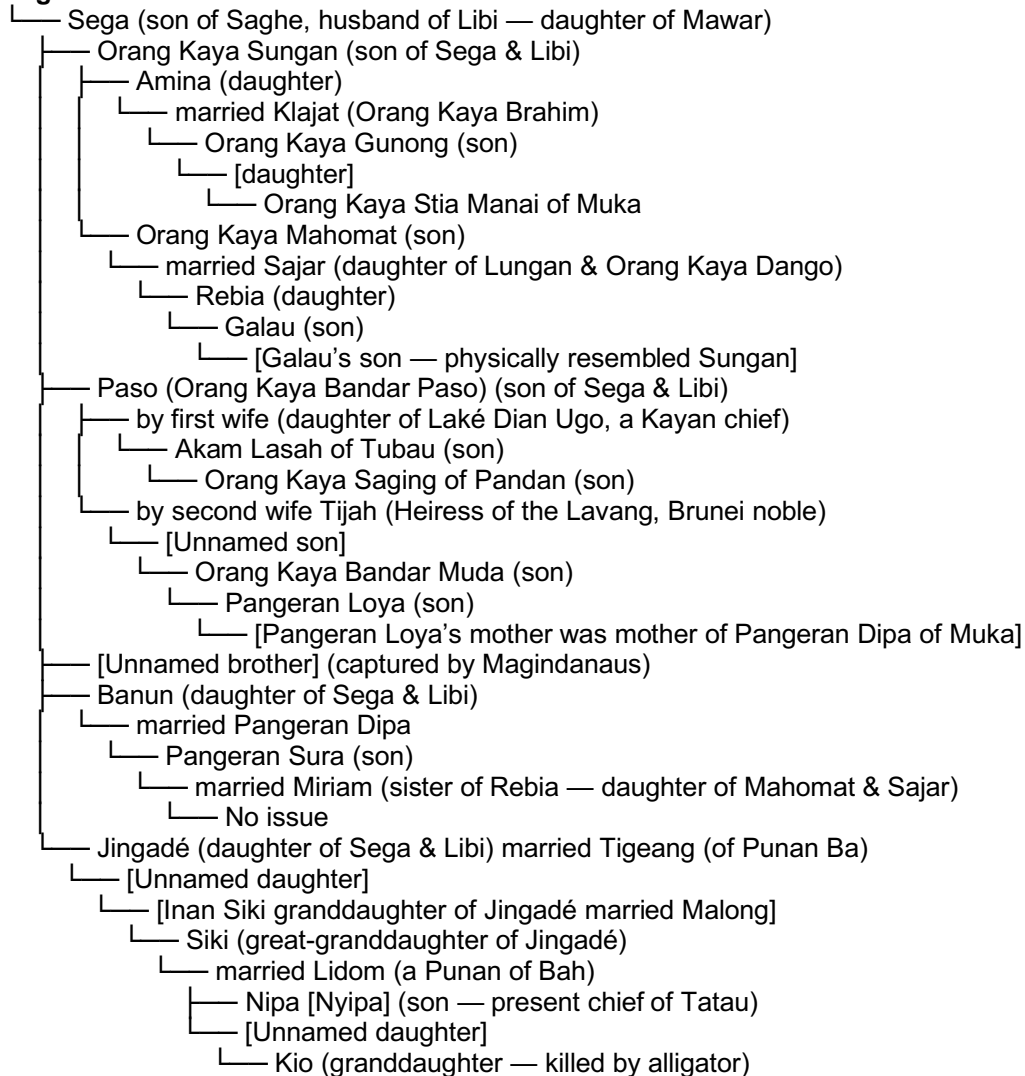
Saghe
└── Sega (son of Saghe, husband of Libi — daughter of Mawar)
   ├── Orang Kaya Sungan (son of Sega & Libi)
   │ ├── Amina (daughter)
   │ │ └── married Klajat (Orang Kaya Brahim)
   │ │   └── Orang Kaya Gunong (son)
   │ │   └── [daughter]
   │ │   └── Orang Kaya Stia Manai of Muka
   │ └── Orang Kaya Mahomat (son)
   │   └── married Sajar (daughter of Lungan & Orang Kaya Dango)
   │   └── Rebia (daughter)
   │   └── Galau (son)
   │   └── [Galau's son — physically resembled Sungan]
   ├── Paso (Orang Kaya Bandar Paso) (son of Sega & Libi)
   │ ├── by first wife (daughter of Laké Dian Ugo, a Kayan chief)
   │ │ └── Akam Lasah of Tubau (son)
   │ │   └── Orang Kaya Saging of Pandan (son)
   │ └── by second wife Tijah (Heiress of the Lavang, Brunei noble)
   │   └── [Unnamed son]
   │   └── Orang Kaya Bandar Muda (son)
   │   └── Pangeran Loya (son)
   │   └── [Pangeran Loya's mother was mother of Pangeran Dipa of Muka]
   ├── [Unnamed brother] (captured by Magindanaus)
   ├── Banun (daughter of Sega & Libi)
   │ └── married Pangeran Dipa
   │   └── Pangeran Sura (son)
   │   └── married Miriam (sister of Rebia — daughter of Mahomat & Sajar)
   │   └── No issue
   └── Jingadé (daughter of Sega & Libi) married Tigeang (of Punan Ba)
      └── [Unnamed daughter]
         └── [Inan Siki granddaughter of Jingadé married Malong]
           └── Siki (great-granddaughter of Jingadé)
             └── married Lidom (a Punan of Bah)
               ├── Nipa [Nyipa] (son — present chief of Tatau)
               └── [Unnamed daughter]
                  └── Kio (granddaughter — killed by alligator)

FIGURE 2. Genealogy of Saghe, the precolonial paramount chief of the Tatau Punan during the period of Brunei rule. (Sources: The Sarawak Gazette Anon (1877a, 1877b, 1878)
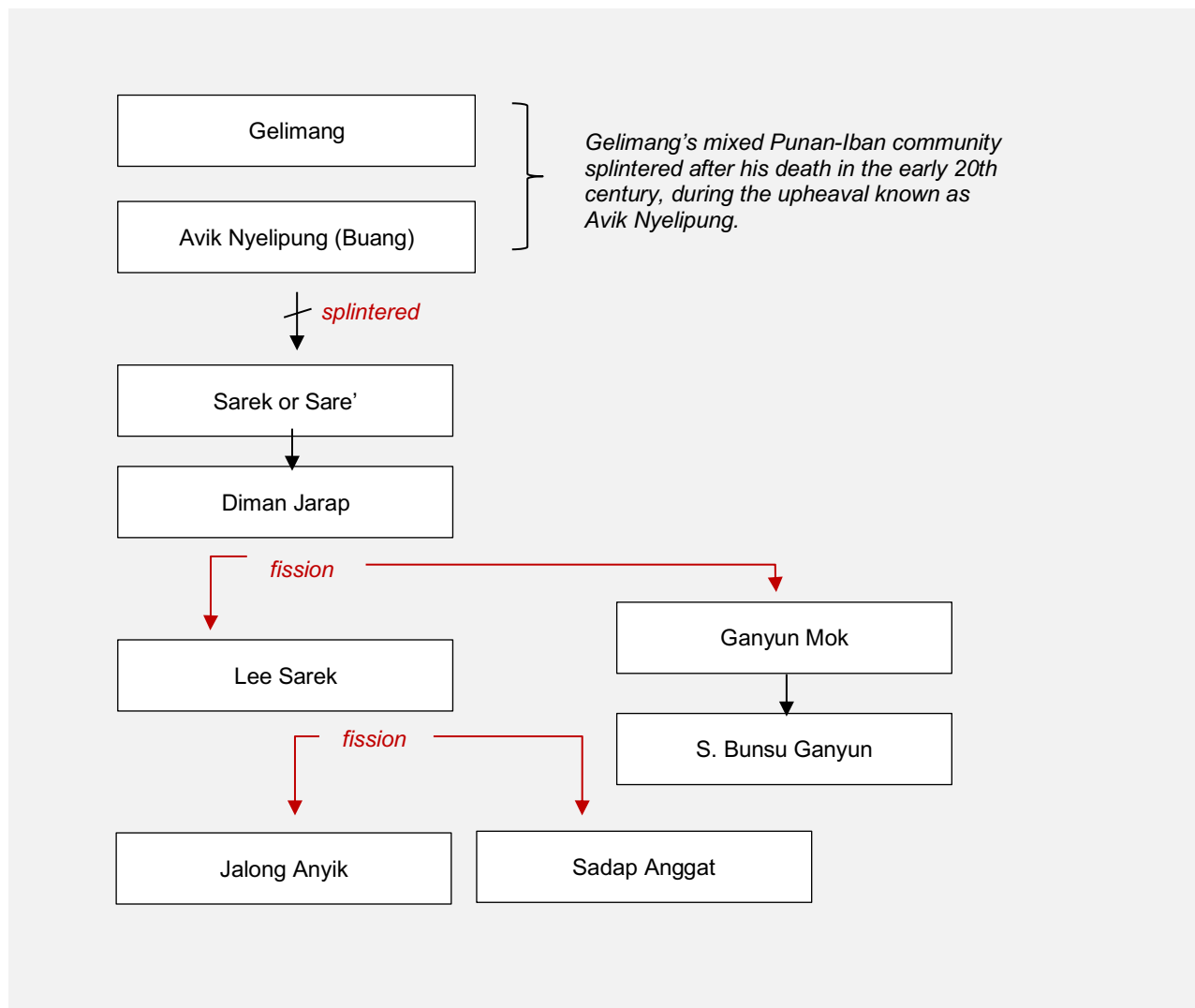
FIGURE 3.Leadership succession of Rumah Gelimang traces its origins to Gelimang and concludes with Avik Nyelipung (Buang). The succession of Rumah Sarek continued through to Diman Jarap, after which the longhouse underwent a fission around 1975, resulting in the formation of two new communities: one led by Lee Sarek and the other by Ganyun Mok. Ganyun was later succeeded by his son, Sylvester Bunsu. A subsequent fission of Lee Sarek's longhouse in the 1990s gave rise to Rumah Jalong Anyik and Rumah Sadap Anggat.

FIGURE 4. Interview with Tuai Rumah Jalong Anyik (left) and his brother Nyengit Anyik, conducted at their family residence in Rumah Jalong Anyik, Nanga Buan, Tatau, on 13 September 2018. The discussion focused on oral histories, genealogical knowledge, and the community's claims to klirieng heritage.
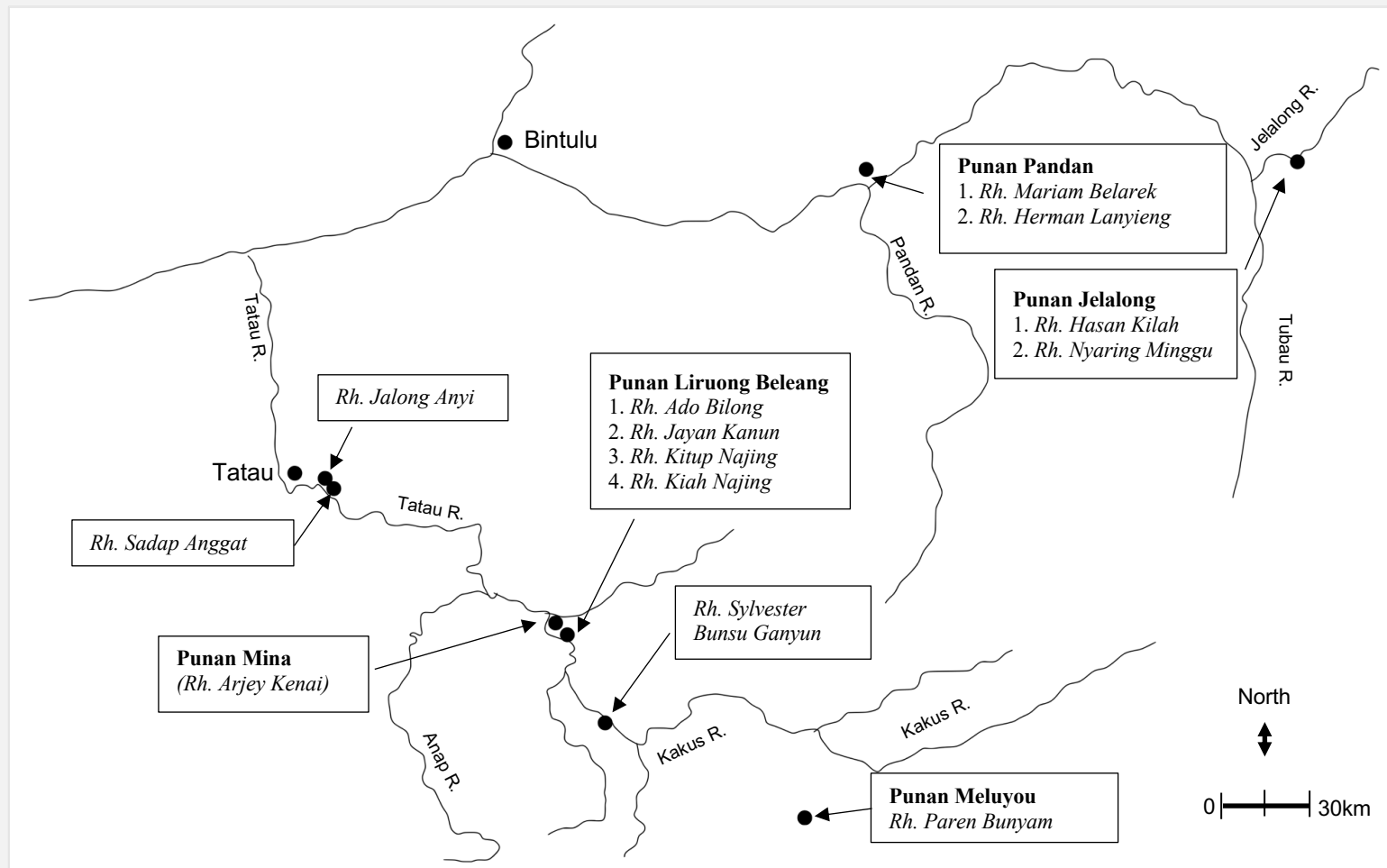
FIGURE 5. Map of Bintulu Division showing the locations of Punan settlements in the districts of Tatau and Sebauh.