INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol 16, Issue 10, (2026) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

What Counts as Lost: Iban Longhouse Rules, Headship and State Recognition in Sarawak, Brunei and West Kalimantan

Chih Siong Wong[1]*, Shi Yee Wong[1], Lim Jin Wong[2], Chu Sheng Ding[1], Prescilla Anak Palis[1]

[1]Centre for Built Environment and Resourceful Societies (BERi), and School of Built Environment, University of Technology Sarawak, Malaysia, [2]Centre on Technological Readiness and Innovation in Business Technopreneurship (CONTRIBUTE), and School of Business and Management, University of Technology Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author Email: andywong@uts.edu.my

DOI Link: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i10/29319

Published Date: 27 October 2026

Abstract

In Sarawak, Brunei and West Kalimantan, the state sets the terms on which an Iban headman is appointed, a longhouse keeps its office or a community is recognised; revising them requires knowing what has changed and whom residents recognise. Of 26 records that assess change, nine read loss, 15 adaptation or change, and two continuity; none compares the three jurisdictions. This critical narrative review examines 34 records, from searches in three languages and citation chaining. It asks what baseline records are used, what changes to the six rules and offices they report, and how the state's part in the headship differs, judging change only against an earlier form documented in place. Three records treat the state's part as recent, yet mid-century ethnography rested the headman's legal authority on colonial government, and appointed headmen date from the late nineteenth century. Of 29 reported changes, 11, all in Sarawak, can be judged: four lapses of rules on farming and collecting and seven rearrangements on land, fruit trees and the headman's mandate. Six of the 11 rest on one study whose interviewees, mostly chiefs, disagreed. In the records obtained, and for the headship, Sarawak's present rules act chiefly on the headman, Brunei's on the office and its members, and West Kalimantan's on the customary community, so each state defines what it can count as lost. None of the 24 contemporary records reports whether residents give more weight to a headman they elect or to one the state appoints; future studies should ask them, record each rule's earlier form and return findings to the longhouse.

Keywords: Iban, Borneo, Adat, Tuai Rumah, Institutional Change

Introduction

The Iban live under three states. The 2020 census counted about 753,500 Iban, the largest of Sarawak's Bumiputera groups (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022); 14,000 to 20,000 live

in Brunei, which does not list them among its indigenous groups under the Nationality Act of 1961 (King & Knudsen, 2021, p. 3; Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah & Lian, 2023, p. 279); and others live in Kapuas Hulu, West Kalimantan (Bupati Kapuas Hulu, 2023; King, 1976, p. 111). The longhouse, a row of family apartments sharing one gallery, has been reshaped by out-migration, resettlement and plantations. In three Song longhouses 51 of 90 households had moved to town by 2016 (Kelabu & Fadzil, 2019, p. 140); the Batang Ai dam moved whole communities into a plantation scheme (Hew & Kedit, 1987); and oil palm has replaced swidden fallows in Selangau and reached Kapuas Hulu as concessions (Leo et al., 2021; Sebli et al., 2026).

Each state's present law carries a colonial past. Sarawak was ruled by the Brooke Rajahs from 1841, ceded to Britain in 1946 and joined Malaysia in 1963, and was administered through numbered Divisions (Cramb, 2007, p. 37). Its headman (*tuai rumah*)[1] is appointed by an authority not bound by official recommendations and serves at the Governor's pleasure for terms of up to four years (Community Chiefs and Headmen Ordinance, 2004, ss. 4–5); he also presides over the lowest native court (Lang, 1998, pp. 111–112; Native Courts Ordinance, 1992, ss. 3–4). The Iban of Melilas moved from Sarawak to Brunei, then under British influence, in the 1940s (Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah & Lian, 2023, pp. 288, 300). Brunei has salaried its longhouse headmen since 2004 and ties the office to the size of the house (Pang, 2018, p. 5). West Kalimantan was Dutch West Borneo (King, 1976, p. 85), and Indonesia's Constitution recognises customary communities only conditionally (Bedner & Arizona, 2019). Kapuas Hulu recognises them by regent's decree under a regulation of 2018 (Pemerintah Kabupaten Kapuas Hulu, 2018), as it did Sungai Utik in 2019 and Sungai Tebelian in 2023 (Bupati Kapuas Hulu, 2023; Prasetyo & Suranto, 2021, p. 98). Each state thus recognises something different, and so defines what it can record as lost.

Two bodies of theory frame what counts as lost. The longhouse's rules and offices form an institution so far as members recognise and enforce them. Mahoney and Thelen (2010) distinguished displacement, when new rules replace old ones; layering, when new rules are added beside them; conversion, when existing rules are turned to new ends; and drift, when unchanged rules work differently in a changed setting. The review's categories, set out in the Method, classify outcomes, not mechanisms, but map onto these modes: a lost rule has been displaced or has lapsed, a rearranged rule has been converted or has gained or shed a layer, and the committees new by report have been layered beside the headship; drift, which a criterion of recognition cannot register, is treated as a condition on the institution. In legal pluralism, Griffiths (1986) distinguished state law that recognises other normative orders within its own hierarchy from those orders' independent existence. The headman holds a mandate from residents under customary law (*adat*) and an appointment from the state; one who gives up the appointment but keeps residents' recognition has lost an office in state law and nothing in *adat*.

The account of the institution on which later writing relies comes from Derek Freeman's fieldwork in the Baleh in 1949–51, and his model had two levels. The *bilik*-families, households holding land, rice and ritual obligations in their own right, were "the intrinsic and irreducible" corporate groups, while the longhouse was a corporate group "in jural, as well as in ritual

[1] Iban terms are italicised throughout and glossed once. Sources spell bilek and baum as well as bilik and aum, and temenggung, tumenggung and patih as well as temenggong and pateh; this review standardises to bilik, aum, temenggong and pateh except in quotation and place names. Works not consulted are not cited.

matters" that owned almost nothing in common (1955/1970, pp. 109, 128). Sather (1996/2006a), writing from the long-settled Saribas, gave the house more weight, describing the *bilik* as incorporated within the longhouse's *adat* community (p. 92). This review follows Appell (2001, Social Organization section), for whom a group is corporate when it can enter jural relations as an entity, so the house can be corporate in some domains and not others. Freeman also recorded the state's part in the headship: "the ultimate sanction of a *tuai rumah*'s legal authority is the power vested in him by Government", which was "an innovation" (1955/1970, p. 110).

Recent work on each jurisdiction stops at its border. Studies of Indonesian recognition trace its move from national law to district regulations and decrees (Duile, 2020; Tamma & Duile, 2020), and Bedner and Arizona (2019) found its results on the ground thin. Sarawak work traces native customary rights to a pre-Brooke *adat* (Langub, 2024) and the headship into party politics after 1963 (Beginda & Bala, 2022); Brunei's Iban appear through citizenship and the salaried office (King & Knudsen, 2021; Pang, 2018). Kern et al. (2024) compared customary institutions within four African states; the Iban allow the reverse comparison, one people's institution under three states, but the records do not make it: no record obtained sets Sarawak, Brunei and West Kalimantan side by side, and five of the six Kalimantan records published since 2000 concern two hamlets of one administrative village, Batu Lintang. They also disagree: of the 26 reviewed here that assess change, nine read it as loss, 15 as adaptation or change and two as continuity. None of the four studies of the present-day headship (Beginda & Bala, 2022; Islam et al., 2020; Jawan, 1996; Pang, 2018) dates the state's part in the office to the colonial period, although Freeman recorded it.

Each state now sets the terms on which it recognises a headman, a house or a community. In Sarawak only appointed headmen receive the monthly allowance (Beginda & Bala, 2022, pp. 110–111); in Brunei posts are abolished as residents leave (Pang, 2018, p. 6); in Kapuas Hulu a ministerial decree secures a community's right to manage its forest (Leo et al., 2021). Reform that dates the state's part too late pursues an autonomy the records do not show, and law that misses lapsed rules fixes forms members no longer keep. No such terms can be revised well without knowing what has changed and whom residents recognise.

This critical narrative review examines 34 records on Iban communities in the three jurisdictions. Its subject is the institution formed by six rules and offices: membership of the *bilik*-family, inheritance of the *bilik*, the headship, the ritual founder or "house source" (*pun rumah*), the meeting of household heads (*aum*) and *adat*. It asks three questions. What model of the longhouse community do the records take as their baseline, and from what fieldwork? What changes to longhouse rules and offices do the records report, and, where an earlier form is documented in place, were they lost or rearranged? How, in the records obtained, does the state's part in the headship and its recognition differ across Sarawak, Brunei and West Kalimantan? The Findings take the questions in turn.

Method

This is a critical narrative review with purposive selection, and every generalisation is limited to the records examined. Each record was therefore coded for whether residents are quoted, paraphrased or measured, and the code is carried into the inventory of changes, so that this mediation is visible at each entry rather than assumed.

Of the four things the word longhouse names (a building, the group that lives in it, a jural community of *bilik*-families and an administrative unit of the state), the review examines the institution carried by the last two, defined operationally as the six rules and offices named in the Introduction, and only these. Change is judged only where an earlier form of the rule or office is documented for the same community, district or river. Against such a form, a rule or office is lost when members no longer recognise or enforce it, or report that it has lapsed; rearranged when members still recognise it but its form, setting or source of mandate differs; and retained if unchanged. A difference from another river's record is variation, not change. Without an earlier form in place, a rule or office is present when members recognise it or act through it, new by report when the record reports its introduction, and otherwise unresolved. The state's part, such as an appointment or the abolition of a post, is recorded beside each change and by itself decides nothing about members' recognition. The size of the co-resident group and the ritual life of its members are treated as conditions bearing on the institution, not as parts of it.

Scopus and Google Scholar were searched with six Scopus and ten Google Scholar strings in English, Malay and Indonesian (Table 1). Land rights and resettlement were searched only through string S3, which returned four records on them. No date, subject or document-type limits were applied. Every exported record was screened on title and abstract (Scopus) or title and snippet (Google Scholar).

Table 1
Search strings and records exported

ID	Database	Search string	Records exported
S1	Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY((iban OR "rumah panjai" OR "rumah panjang" OR longhouse) AND ("tuai rumah" OR headman OR "community chief" OR "ketua kaum" OR "ketua masyarakat" OR adat OR "customary law" OR "native court"))	16
S2	Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(iban AND (bilek OR bilik OR egalitarian* OR kinship OR "social organisation" OR "social organisation" OR "longhouse community") AND (sarawak OR brunei OR kalimantan OR borneo))	19
S3	Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY((iban OR longhouse) AND (migration OR urbanis* OR urbaniz* OR resettle* OR "land development" OR conversion OR christian* OR islam*) AND (sarawak OR brunei OR kalimantan))	47
S4	Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY((iban OR dayak) AND (leadership OR governance OR "community cohesion" OR "conflict resolution" OR "dispute settlement" OR "social capital") AND (sarawak OR brunei OR kalimantan OR borneo))	51
S5	Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("masyarakat adat" OR "hukum adat" OR "hutan adat" OR "rumah betang" OR "rumah panjang") AND (iban OR dayak) AND (kalimantan OR "kapuas hulu"))	1
S6	Scopus	TITLE(iban AND longhouse)	7

ID	Database	Search string	Records exported
G1	Google Scholar	"tuai rumah" Sarawak OR Brunei OR Kalimantan	538
G2	Google Scholar	Iban longhouse "community chief" OR "ketua kaum" adat	19
G3	Google Scholar	Iban "longhouse community" migration town urban	169
G4	Google Scholar	"tuai rumah" kepimpinan OR perlantikan OR elaun OR "ketua masyarakat"	62
G5	Google Scholar	Iban adat "native court" Sarawak ordinance	128
G6	Google Scholar	"rumah panjai" adat Iban	79
G7	Google Scholar	"rumah panjang" Iban "hutan adat" OR "masyarakat adat" Kapuas Hulu	89
G8	Google Scholar	Iban Brunei longhouse Temburong OR Belait citizenship	116
G9	Google Scholar	allintitle: Iban longhouse	50
G10	Google Scholar	allintitle: "tuai rumah"	5

Records were eligible if they concerned the Iban and made substantive claims about at least one longhouse institution: the *bilik*-family, the headman, *adat*, egalitarian ideals, or the longhouse community as a social unit, a scope wider than the six rules and offices so that records on the community as a whole could be read for them. Architectural, tourism and material-culture studies without institutional content were excluded, as were studies of other Dayak groups. Before any full text was read, a stricter criterion was set: a record had to report primary data or analyse primary sources, such as ethnographies, archives, or legal texts, on the institution itself. One record admitted under it states no method (Jawan, 1996) but reads a legal text, the codified *adat* of 1993; an essay that stated no method and analysed no primary source was excluded. At full text, a record was also excluded if its publication could not be confirmed. The authors made all decisions regarding database screening and chaining, and no independent check of agreement was performed. Iban-language sources and one French ethnography of urban Iban (Lavoie-Lemieux, 2025) fell outside the three languages searched, so absences hold only for the records obtained, not for residents' own written accounts.

The searches identified 1,396 records (Scopus 141; Google Scholar 1,255). After 347 duplicates were removed, 1,049 were screened and 904 excluded. Of the 145 sought in full, 48 were obtained; five failed the criterion on primary material and one failed the criterion on publication, leaving 42. Backward citation chaining in three rounds added Freeman (1961, 1981), Pringle (1970/2010), Hew and Kedit (1987) and Sandin (1994). Forward chaining was not performed. Publications reporting the same fieldwork or survey were counted once (Table 2), so the corpus comprises 34 records from 47 publications. Ten of the 17 Sarawak records that name a place come from four river systems, with their tributaries: the Baleh, a Rejang

tributary (Freeman, 1955/1970, p. 135), studied in 1949–51, 1957–58 and 2007–09; the Saribas, with the Paku, now in Betong District (Cramb, 2007, p. 37), in 1976–2001 and 2013–20; the Batang Ai, with the Engkari, in 1973–90; and the Kanowit, another Rejang tributary (Soda, 2001, p. 94), in 1995–2000.

Each record was coded for its fieldwork period and river, basis of evidence, framing of change and residents' voice (Table 2), for its baseline and the part it gives the state, and by treating the state's part in the headship as recent where it presents consent or persuasion as the office's first form and state involvement as a recent departure. Eight records that describe a society or its history without assessing change, among them Freeman's and Sandin (1994), are marked n/a or not counted. Each change to one of the six rules or offices was entered once in Table 3, as one study reports it for a named community, a district or a group of communities the study does not separate; Cramb's account of Nanga Tapih yields two entries, since the annual allocation of farmland lapsed while the house's claim to the common pool was redirected (2007, p. 322). The 24 records outside the baseline and historical group of Table 2 that quote, paraphrase or measure residents or office-holders, called contemporary records here, were searched for any account of how residents weigh an elected against an appointed headman.

Table 2
The 34 records in the corpus

Record	Jurisdiction; place; fieldwork or data	Basis of evidence	Framing of change (record's own)	Residents' voice
Baseline and historical				
Freeman (1955/1970, 1961, 1981)[a]	Sarawak; Baleh; 1949–51, 1957–58	Ethnography; historical sources	Not counted (describes a society)	Quoted (one office-holder)
Pringle (1970/2010)	Sarawak; 1841–1941	Archival history	n/a	None
Rousseau (1980)	Sarawak, general; no fieldwork	Reanalysis of published ethnography	n/a	None
Sather (1993/2006b, 1996/2006a)[a]	Sarawak; Saribas (Paku); 1976–79, 1981–84, 1988	Ethnography; critique	n/a	None
Sandin (1994)[b]	Sarawak; Saribas (Paku, Rimbas); oral tradition to the 1970s	Oral history; genealogies	n/a	n/a
King (2017)	Sarawak, general	Analysis of Freeman's texts and debates	n/a	n/a
Sarawak				
Padoch (1982)	Engkari, Kemena, Ensebang; 1970s	Ethnography	Adaptation	Not assessed
Hew & Kedit (1987)	Batang Ai resettlement; 1985	Survey of 50 women; verbatim accounts	Abrogation; erosion	Quoted

Record	Jurisdiction; place; fieldwork or data	Basis of evidence	Framing of change (record's own)	Residents' voice
Cramb (2007)[a]	Saribas; 1979–2001	Two community case studies; resurvey 2001	Adaptation	Paraphrased
Jawan (1991)	Sri Aman, Kapit; 1990	Fieldwork; documents	Incorporation	Paraphrased
Jawan (1996)	Sarawak, general; not reported	Reading of the codified *adat* of 1993; no method stated	Continuity	None
Lang (1998)	Sarawak	Legal analysis	n/a	None
Ng (1999)	Batang Ai, Telaus; 1990	Site visit; interviews; secondary sources	Deterioration (women's position)	Quoted
Soda (2001, 2003)[a]	Kanowit, Sibu; 1995–2000	Survey; participant observation	Decline; rearrangement	Paraphrased
Ichikawa (2008)	Sarawak; Bakong (Baram), Sri Aman; 2005	Interviews: 16 people, mostly longhouse and regional chiefs, in 15 longhouses	Gradual change	Paraphrased (mostly office-holders)
Song survey (Kwok et al., 2016, 2018)[a]	Song; not reported	Survey of 260 household heads	Deficit; participation	Measured
Pakan survey (Ak Anggum et al., 2015; Islam et al., 2020)[a]	Pakan; 2013	Survey of 210 household heads	Deficit	Measured
Hasegawa (2018)	Baleh; 2007–09	Ethnography	Decline	Paraphrased
Kelabu & Fadzil (2019)[b]	Song; 2016	Ethnography; 60 informants	Development gap	Quoted
Edward (2020)	Sarawak; Saribas and Kelaka; 2013–20	Legal analysis; interviews with nine participants; two sessions with headmen and chiefs	Adaptation	Quoted
Seidelson (2021)	Sarawak; not reported	Ethnography; snowball sample	Change; new family form	Quoted
Beginda & Bala (2022)	Sarawak; 1963–2021	Circulars, court report, press, one interview	Decline	Paraphrased (press)
Sercombe (2023)	Sri Aman; 1989–2022	Ethnography; household heads	Maintenance and change	Quoted
Sebli et al. (2026)	Selangau; 2025	Interviews; focus groups; four women leaders	Agency	Quoted (women leaders)

Record	Jurisdiction; place; fieldwork or data	Basis of evidence	Framing of change (record's own)	Residents' voice
Brunei				
Pang (2018)	Belait; 2018	Interviews: five headmen, one official	Decline	Quoted (headmen)
Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah & Lian (2023)[a,b]	Melilas; not reported	Oral history; documents	Adaptation	Quoted
King & Knudsen (2021)	Temburong; 2018–21	Ethnography	Continuity and change	Quoted
West Kalimantan				
King (1976)	Embaloh, Leboyan; 1972–73	Archives; fieldwork	n/a	None
Wadley (2000)	Wong Garai; 1992–96	Ethnography; 14 households	Adaptation	Measured
Leo et al. (2021)[a]	Sungai Utik; 2020–21	Three informants; ecosystem survey	Adaptation	Paraphrased
Prasetyo & Suranto (2021)	Sungai Utik; not reported	Interviews; observation	Adaptation	Paraphrased
Setiawan et al. (2023)	Sungai Utik; 2021	Interviews; literature	Autonomy	Paraphrased
Bahri et al. (2025)	Sungai Utik; not reported	Participatory interviews with leaders	Resilience	Quoted (leaders)
Septiana (2026)	Menua Kulan; 2025	14 interviews; household survey; focus groups	Adaptation	Quoted

n/a = the record does not assess change, or reports no one's words; not reported = the record does not state its fieldwork period. Residents' voice: quoted = residents' own words given; paraphrased = residents' views summarised by the author; measured = residents' responses to closed survey items; not assessed = not coded for residents' voice. [a] Linked record: publications reporting the same fieldwork or survey, counted once. [b] Author states an Iban connection.

Findings

The baseline, the dispute over the unit and the colonial record

Freeman's own account of the longhouse offices was more differentiated than the model later drawn from it. The headship was not hereditary. When a *tuai rumah* died, the longhouse chose his successor at a general meeting (*aum*) at which "women as well as men" gave their opinions; "There is, of course, no system of voting", and the choice always fell within the core group of founding families, so that kinship delimited the field without naming the heir (1955/1970, p. 111). Of six Baleh successions he tabulated to show the range of relationship, one passed from father to son (p. 112). Freeman also wrote of "election to political office" for this choice (p. 85), and only men held the office (pp. 85, 109), though he had heard stories of communities with female leaders (p. 85, n. 1). Succession to the founder's position, the *pun*

rumah, followed no strict rule either: as the *pun rumah* of Rumah Nyala told Freeman in December 1957, a worthy son might follow, or a son-in-law, a nephew or anyone else chosen (1981, p. 34). The account rests on fieldwork in the Baleh in 1949–51 and 1957–58 (Freeman, 1961, p. 216, n. 26) and a later visit in 1976 (King, 2017, p. 85).

Freeman and Sather differ on the unit the model describes, and part of the difference lies in what each calls "corporate". Freeman tied the *bilik*-family's autonomy to pioneering: "in a pioneer region, like the Baleh", few houses kept "the same combination of *bilek*-families for more than a year on end" (1955/1970, p. 127). He found the house's corporateness "low" and rooted in ritual (p. 104) and denied it collective ownership of land (p. 109). Yet his report gave each house a territory, allotted by the government when the Baleh was resettled in 1922, to which its families held "common and equal rights of access" against other houses until the forest was felled (pp. 105, 143). It required a family, upon leaving one house for another, to make a quittance payment (pemali rumah) to the augur (p. 124). Sather (1993/2006b), from fieldwork in the Paku in 1976–79, 1981–84 and 1988 (p. 113), described hearth rules that bind each *bilik* to the house: a family moving to another house must pay fines and perform a ritual "throwing away of the hearth" (p. 75). He judged corporateness "only a partial view of the longhouse" (pp. 109–110). Cramb (2007), with Saribas's evidence from 1979–2001, followed Appell in viewing the territory as "a corporate possession", because communities contested boundaries and cultivation rights were "subject to the authority of the headman" and contingent on membership (p. 54); he found the headman holding the community's reversionary right (p. 335) and read Freeman's denial as belonging to "the pioneer context he studied" (p. 54). Appell (2001, Land Tenure section), in an overview excluded as secondary, drew that conclusion from Freeman's own evidence, with Freeman's agreement by personal communication.

Padoch's evidence from the lower Engkari, "settled for 300 years" (1982, p. 34), tests whether the difference follows settlement history. She found the land principles Freeman reported for the Baleh to "also generally hold" in 1973–76, a house's claim to a territory against other houses among them (p. 43), yet "merely leaving a particular longhouse community" did not end a household's rights to land it had felled; residents agreed only that moving beyond a distance from which one could return to farm did so, and could not agree on the distance (p. 48). The three rivers thus share a claim by the house against other houses and household rights that depend on staying, and differ on the headman's authority over land and on what reverts to the house when a household leaves, most in the Saribas and least on the Engkari. Both ends of that range are long-settled rivers, so settlement history alone does not order it, although the three accounts also come from different periods: 1949–51, 1973–76 and 1979–2001. Ichikawa (2008, pp. 6–7, 11) found no clear difference in 2005 between the Bakong, settled from the late nineteenth century, and long-settled Sri Aman; in both, an emigrant household's land passed to relatives, and to the headman only if none remained.

The historical record adds the state, and again the dates vary by place. Freeman (1981) described leadership before state appointment: elders (*tuai*) recognised as mediators were "chosen by their peers for their individual abilities" (p. 34), and after the *penghulu* was instituted in 1883, one of them in each longhouse of a *penghulu*'s district was, "as the need arose", "singled out and appointed official house headman" (p. 17); in the Baleh the *tuai rumah* had in former times been "very much less important than it is today" (1955/1970, p.

111). Pringle (1970/2010) called the *penghulu*, introduced in 1883, "an invention of the Government" (p. 157). Under the Second Rajah headmen, though not formally recognised, usually collected the door tax (pp. 157–158). Brooke rule had reached the Saribas earlier, with Betong Fort built in 1858 (p. 155). There Sandin's (1994) family genealogies give 14 headman successions from about 1867 to 1973 in which the relationship is stated: by this review's count, eight to a son, one to a son's son, three to a son-in-law and two to a nephew (pp. 273–296, 322). A family genealogy is less likely to record successions that left the family, so the count cannot be set against Freeman's one in six, and Cramb's rule that the headman's "position is not inheritable" (2007, p. 54) comes from a general account that follows Freeman ("As Freeman has stressed"), not from Saribas's observation. Succession from father to son may therefore describe practice, or the shape of the record, rather than a rule.

The studies of the present-day headship engage neither the dispute nor this record. Jawan (1996, p. 123) called Iban society "classless and highly egalitarian", citing a Freeman work of 1970, listed as Iban Agriculture, without a page; he described the headman as popularly elected, as Freeman's loose "election" allows, and read the codified *adat* of 1993 as new support for an office that had rested on persuasion (n. 6). Beginda and Bala (2022) grounded the headman's authority in persuasion and consent and, on a 2017 interview, described decisions by majority vote in the *aum* (pp. 104–105), as the Song survey did (Kwok et al., 2016, p. 34), where Freeman reported no voting and Cramb a consensus observed "though there is no explicit rule to that effect" (2007, p. 56). The Pakan survey gave two accounts of the office: appointment for experience and influence (Ak Anggum et al., 2015, p. 3) and inheritance from generation to generation (Islam et al., 2020). Pang (2018, p. 6), without a source, described appointment by the people of the longhouse and, usually, "an inherited position, from father to son". In Selangau, one woman's father "bequeathed her the *tuai rumah* position with the *anembiak*'s endorsement", that of the house's members (Sebli et al., 2026, p. 249). Election, consent, merit, inheritance and patrilineal choice are five accounts of one office, and that succession joins two of them. Each matches some recorded practice, choice by meeting in the Baleh and succession from father to son in the Saribas, but none is placed in its history or its river. A legal study drawing on Saribas and Kelaka testimony of 2013–20 placed the headman's subordination to the *penghulu* in 1883, yet held that headmen were "predominantly chosen and appointed by consensus" until an ordinance of 1996 "completely abolished" the *adat* of headship (Edward, 2020, pp. 119, 143, 223). The history shows not that these studies misread the office's first form but that they date the state's part in it too late: the office has answered both to residents and to a state since the late nineteenth century.

Loss and rearrangement in the records

Of the 26 records that assess change, 15 read it as adaptation or change, nine as loss, and two as continuity or incorporation, but the balance differs by jurisdiction. All six West Kalimantan records read adaptation; in Sarawak, eight read loss, seven adaptation or change and two continuity; and in Brunei, one reads loss and two adaptation (Table 2). Since the Indonesian strings favoured records on recognition, the balance partly reflects the search. Of the three records that treat the state's part in the headship as recent, Beginda and Bala (2022) read change as decline, Jawan (1996) as continuity and Edward (2020) as adaptation; Edward treats only the state's appointment of the headman as recent, since he dates the headman's subordination to the *penghulu* to 1883 (pp. 119, 223). The eight other readings of loss respond to depopulation, ritual change and the delivery of state programmes (Hasegawa, 2018; Kelabu

& Fadzil, 2019; Pang, 2018; Soda, 2001; the Pakan and Song surveys) and, at Batang Ai, to resettlement and the plantation scheme that followed (Hew & Kedit, 1987; Ng, 1999).

Depopulation and the thinning of ritual life are conditions the criterion cannot register as loss. In three Song longhouses 51 of 90 households had moved to town by 2016 (Kelabu & Fadzil, 2019, p. 140); in Rantau Kemiding, a Kanowit village, 10 of 69 dwellings stood empty in 1996 (Soda, 2001, pp. 96, 107); and in the Baleh in 2007–09 the gawai, the major ritual festivals, were locally in their "twilight", though their bards remained active (Hasegawa, 2018). Neighbouring houses differed: between 1980 and 2001 Batu Lintang's residents fell from 185 to 116 while Nanga Tapih's held at 110 (Cramb, 2007, p. 302), and the rule that lapsed at Nanga Tapih, the house that kept its people, was one that Batu Lintang, with no common farming land, never had (p. 321).

Table 3 enters the 29 changes to the six rules and offices that 14 studies report for named communities, districts or groups of communities between the 1980s and 2024. Five further changes, to the timing of rituals, food at Gawai, labour and the unity of a house, fall outside the six and are not entered (Hasegawa, 2018; Kelabu & Fadzil, 2019, pp. 144–145; King & Knudsen, 2021, p. 31; Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah & Lian, 2023, p. 294; Soda, 2001, pp. 107–108). Eleven changes, all in Sarawak and from four studies, have an earlier form documented in place. Four are lapses: the meeting on farming in Rantau Kemiding and the headman's allocation of plots at Nanga Tapih ceased, neither attributed by its author to the state, though Soda ties the turn to wet rice to a policy of the 1950s (2001, p. 98); and in the Bakong and Sri Aman members could no longer collect useful plants on another *bilik*'s land once the plants sold in town (Ichikawa, 2008, p. 10). Seven are rearrangements: Serembai, in the Lemanak, changed its *adat* in the 1980s to take back emigrants' rubber land; Nanga Tapih still held its former allocation pool in 2001 as "a shared community resource" (Cramb, 2007, p. 323); in Betong in 2016, by press reports cited by Beginda and Bala (2022, p. 110), six headmen gave up state appointment and kept leading by residents' choice; and in both of Ichikawa's areas rights in fruit trees passed from planter to landholder and emigrants' land became saleable, which he traced to commercialisation from the late 1960s (2008, pp. 8–13).

The other 18 changes have no earlier form in place. Seven are present: members recognise or act through them, but no record shows what they replaced. Two committees tied to state programmes are new by report: the village committee in Song (Kwok et al., 2016, pp. 31–32; Beginda & Bala, 2022, p. 106) and the committee at Batang Ai, part of "the new system of committees" (Hew & Kedit, 1987, p. 189). Nine changes cannot be judged. Six are acts of the state, among them the abolition of the Temburong headmen's posts (Pang, 2018, p. 6) and the resettlement at Mepi Pasir, where a settler's complaint that residents were "not included in decision-making like in old times" concerned the project, not a longhouse rule (Hew & Kedit, 1987, pp. 202–203). The other three are practices whose records do not say whether a rule is still enforced, such as the empty rooms urban heirs keep in two Saribas longhouses (Cramb, 2007, pp. 332–333). No record reports a dated change in the *pun rumah*'s position.

Where the headship meets the state, its two sources of authority can separate: in Belait in 2018 a headman recognised by residents stopped work until the state recognised him (Pang, 2018, p. 6), and in Betong the separation ran the other way. In Selangau, Sebli et al. (2026, pp. 246–247) described one woman "unanimously elected" *tuai rumah* in 2016 and another

"appointed" in 2024, without saying how. At Batang Ai the committee of the headman and members chosen by residents was the longhouse's only formal body and its channel to the plantation agency, and no woman sat on it in 1985 or 1990 (Hew & Kedit, 1987, pp. 180, 188; Ng, 1999, p. 84). Hew and Kedit read this as muting women, who had "traditionally participated with their men in open dialogue" (pp. 188–189); the record shows who sat on the committee, not whether women ceased to speak.

Residents are quoted in nine records and office-holders alone in four: Bahri et al. (2025), Pang (2018), Sebli et al. (2026), and Freeman, who quotes only the *pun rumah* of Rumah Nyala. At Batang Ai a team of four women, three of them Iban, recorded the settlers' words (Hew & Kedit, 1987, p. 177). Women office-holders have been interviewed about their own leadership (Sebli et al., 2026). Six of the 11 judged changes rest on paraphrased accounts by one study's interviewees, mostly longhouse and regional chiefs (Ichikawa, 2008, pp. 17, 19); among the entries reported as present, residents state the rule only at Bungkang. In the 24 contemporary records searched, none reports how residents weigh a headman they elect against one the state appoints, the tension the Belait and Betong cases expose. Two records concern a resettled longhouse and none a peri-urban one.

Table 3
Changes to longhouse rules and offices reported for named communities or districts

Rule or office[a]	Community; date	Evidence	Earlier form	Type; voice[a]	State's part	Status[a]
B: inheritance	Bungkang, Sri Aman; 1989–2022	Parents choose who remains (Sercombe, 2023, p. 50)	At least one child remains (Freeman, 1961, p. 211); one principal heir (Sather, 1996/2006a, p. 91) [general]	Residents' norm; Q	None	Present
B: inheritance	Temburong (Brunei); 2018–21	Claim earned by the co-resident child who cares for the parents, "pressed and conceded to" (King & Knudsen, 2021, p. 36)	As above [general]	Recognition reported; Q	None	Present

Rule or office[a]	Community; date	Evidence	Earlier form	Type; voice[a]	State's part	Status[a]
B: rights in fruit trees	Bakong, Baram; 2005	Elder brother's trees pass to the younger brother holding the land: 3 of 8, answers differing within one longhouse (Ichikawa, 2008, pp. 8–9)	The planter held them [same communities]	Residents' norm; P	None stated	Rearranged
B: head of household	Batang Ai resettlement; 1985, 1990	Shares to the head of household, a man if present (Hew & Kedit, 1987, p. 187; Ng, 1999, pp. 86–87, 89)	Equal land rights for women and men (Hew & Kedit, 1987, p. 188) [general]	State action; Q	Shares to heads, men where present	Unresolved
L: membership of absentees	Rantau Kemiding, Kanowit; 1996	Urban owners of vacant apartments keep rights; no clear criterion for others (Soda, 2001, p. 110, n. 20)	Not documented	Recognition reported; P	None	Present
L: membership of absentees	Batu Lintang, Nanga Tapih, Saribas; 2001	Urban heirs keep empty rooms (Cramb, 2007, pp. 332–333)	Rights resumed only with the headman's agreement (Cramb, 2007, p. 331) [jurisdiction]; hearth lit twice a month (p. 349, n. 13) [general]	Practice; P	Court: moving to town is not migration (*pindah*) (Cramb, 2007, p. 333)	Unresolved

Rule or office[a]	Community; date	Evidence	Earlier form	Type; voice[a]	State's part	Status[a]
L: hearth obligation	Baleh; 2009	Fee to reuse the hearth after a month away (Hasegawa, 2018, n. 13)	No hearth rule; a different rule, a payment to the augur on departure (Freeman, 1955/1970, p. 124) [same river]	Rule enforced; P	None	Present
L: emigrants' rubber land	Serembai, Lemanak; 1980s	Adat changed to take back the land for a cocoa scheme, by an agriculture officer's report (Cramb, 2007, pp. 332, 349, n. 11)	Emigrants kept rubber land while the trees lived (Cramb, 2007, pp. 331–332) [same river]	Rule enforced; P	Not stated	Rearranged
L: emigrants' land	Bakong and Sri Aman; 2005	Saleable before a move (14 of 16); a Bakong sister who married out given a share in 2001 (Ichikawa, 2008, pp. 11–12)	Not saleable; no right for her [same communities]	Residents' norm; P	None stated	Rearranged
L: fruit trees on another *bilik*'s land	Bakong, Baram; 2005	Held by the landholder: 4 of 8, 4 saying planting was never allowed (Ichikawa, 2008, pp. 8–9)	Held by the planter 10 to 40 years before [same communities]	Residents' norm; P	None stated	Rearranged

Rule or office[a]	Community; date	Evidence	Earlier form	Type; voice[a]	State's part	Status[a]
L: fruit trees on another *bilik*'s land	Sri Aman; 2005	As above: 3 of 8, 5 saying never allowed	As above	Residents' norm; P	None stated	Rearranged
L: collecting on another *bilik*'s land	Bakong, Baram; 2005	Members may no longer collect useful plants, now saleable, on fallow (5 of 8) or in gardens (4 of 8) (Ichikawa, 2008, pp. 8, 10)	Any member could, 20 to 30 years before [same communities]	Residents' norm; P	None stated	Lost
L: collecting on another *bilik*'s land	Sri Aman; 2005	As above: fallow 2 of 8, gardens 2 of 8	As above	Residents' norm; P	None stated	Lost
L: forest *adat*	Sungai Utik (West Kalimantan); not reported	Revised yearly; fines set by the *temenggong* (Prasetyo & Suranto, 2021, p. 97)	Not documented	Rule enforced; P	Community and forest recognised by decree, 2019–20	Present
L: meeting on farming	Rantau Kemiding, Kanowit; 1996	Not held since the 1980s (Soda, 2001, pp. 107–108)	Held before the 1980s [same community]	Rule lapsed; P	Indirect: wet-rice policy of the 1950s (Soda, 2001, p. 98)	Lost
L: allocation of farm land	Nanga Tapih, Saribas; 2001	Plots chosen without headman or meeting (Cramb, 2007, p. 322)	Headman allocated plots at the farm meeting, 1980–84 (Cramb, 2007, pp. 320–321) [same community]	Rule lapsed; P	None	Lost

Rule or office[a]	Community; date	Evidence	Earlier form	Type; voice[a]	State's part	Status[a]
L: common land	Nanga Tapih, Saribas; 2000–01	A shared resource; joint application with neighbouring houses for a land scheme (Cramb, 2007, pp. 322–323, 343–344)	Pool allocated yearly for hill rice (Cramb, 2007, pp. 320–321) [same community]	Recognition reported; P	Land development scheme applied for	Rearranged
L: membership of migrants	Kanowit and Sibu; 1996–2000	Return at elections to secure funds (Soda, 2003)	Not documented	Practice; P	Development funds tied to elections	Unresolved
S: say in the scheme's decisions	Mepi Pasir, Batang Ai resettlement; 1985	Settler: "We are not included in decision-making like in old times" (Hew & Kedit, 1987, pp. 202–203)	"In old times"; the referent is the project (p. 202)	State action; Q	Decisions taken "from top to bottom" (p. 202)	Unresolved
S: headship mandate	Belait (Brunei); 2018	Recognised by residents; stopped work until the state recognised him (Pang, 2018, p. 6)	Chosen by residents; salaried from 2004 (Pang, 2018, pp. 5–6) [jurisdiction]	Office in action; OH	Recognition awaited	Present
S: headship mandate	Betong[b]; 2016	Six headmen gave up state appointment and kept leading by residents' choice (Beginda & Bala, 2022, p. 110)	State appointment since 1980, held by one of the six [same district]	Office in action; Pr	Appointment given up	Rearranged

Rule or office[a]	Community; date	Evidence	Earlier form	Type; voice[a]	State's part	Status[a]
S: village committee	Song; not reported	Heads leave programme problems to it, benefits to it and leaders (Kwok et al., 2016, pp. 31–32); adopted by the state in 1987 (Beginda & Bala, 2022, p. 106)	Not documented	Office in action; M	Committee created by the state	New by report
S: longhouse committee	Batang Ai resettlement; 1985, 1990	Headman and members chosen by residents; no women; part of "the new system of committees" (Hew & Kedit, 1987, pp. 180, 188–189; Ng, 1999, p. 84)	Women "traditionally participated" in open dialogue (Hew & Kedit, 1987, pp. 188–189) [general]	Office in action; Q	Liaison with the plantation agency	New by report
S: eligibility for headship	Selangau; 2016	Woman elected unanimously (Sebli et al., 2026, p. 246)	Men only, with reported exceptions (Freeman, 1955/1970, pp. 85, 109) [other river]; women headmen from the 1970s (Jawan, 1996, p. 123, n. 5) [general]	Office in action; OH	None	Present

Rule or office[a]	Community; date	Evidence	Earlier form	Type; voice[a]	State's part	Status[a]
S: eligibility for headship	Selangau; 2024	Woman appointed "in 2024" (p. 247) but "three years" in office (p. 241); route not stated (Sebli et al., 2026)	As above	State action; OH	Appointed	Unresolved
S: headship mandate	Kanowit, Marudi[b]; 2011–13	Headmen dismissed by the state (Beginda & Bala, 2022, p. 109)	Not applicable	State action; Pr	Dismissed	Unresolved
S: combined offices	Melilas, Belait (Brunei); not reported	Headman also *penghulu* and village head (Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah & Lian, 2023, p. 287)	Not applicable	State action; Q	Offices combined	Unresolved
S: headman's office	Temburong (Brunei); before 2018	Posts abolished; holders made village heads (Pang, 2018, p. 6)	Not applicable	State action; OH	Posts abolished	Unresolved
S: succession	Belait (Brunei); 2018	One headman's children unwilling (Pang, 2018, p. 8)	Not applicable	Practice; OH	None	Unresolved

The table is an inventory of what 14 studies report, not a measure of how common each status is.

[a] B, the *bilik*; L, the longhouse; S, the headship where it meets the state. Rule enforced or lapsed: the record reports a rule applied, or its occasion ceasing; recognition reported: the author reports that members recognise a right; residents' norm: residents or office-holders state the rule; office in action: members act through the office or meeting; state action: the state appoints, dismisses, combines, abolishes or decides, with no report of what members

recognise; practice: behaviour reported, enforcement not stated. Voice (Table 2): Q, residents quoted; OH, office-holders only; P, paraphrased; Pr, press; M, measured. Communities are in Sarawak unless marked. Earlier forms come from the same source unless cited, and are marked as documented for the same community, district or river, another river, a jurisdiction or in general. Status: lost or rearranged only against an earlier form for the same community, district or river; otherwise present (the first four types), new by report (the record reports the body's introduction) or unresolved. Records that report changes for no named community or district (Edward, 2020; Seidelson, 2021) are not entered.

[b] Known through press reports cited by Beginda and Bala (2022).

The state and the headship: colonial designation and three post-colonial paths

In the records obtained, the Sarawak state's present instruments act chiefly on the office-holder. The office that the Brooke administration drew into tax collection became, under the Native Courts Ordinance, 1992, the lowest tier of a statutory court system (Lang, 1998, pp. 111–112). Residents still nominate a candidate, but the District Office screens the name with elected representatives before appointment, and only appointed headmen receive the monthly allowance, raised from RM450 to RM800 (Malaysian ringgit) (Beginda & Bala, 2022, pp. 110–111). A circular of 1980 made appointment terminable at the government's pleasure, and the High Court upheld it in 2011 (p. 111). One legal study reports, without a source, that houses of fewer than 20 families, unless founded by 1963, have no official headman and keep an unpaid one chosen under *adat* (Edward, 2020, p. 147). Colonial rules acted on the house as well: the Third Division's schedule of fines of 1940 forbade building a house of fewer than ten doors, or apartments, without permission (Freeman, 1955/1970, p. 164, n. 1). In resettlement the state reached the *bilik*: the Batang Ai scheme issued plantation shares to the head of household, a man wherever there was one, where *adat* gave women and men equal rights to land (Hew & Kedit, 1987, pp. 187–188; Ng, 1999, pp. 86–87, 89).

In the records obtained, the Brunei state acts on the office and on the membership of the community. Headmen have been salaried public servants since 2004, and their scheme of service sets the conditions under which the office exists: more than seven doors or fifty residents, an age between thirty and sixty-five, and eligibility for permanent residents as well as citizens (Pang, 2018, p. 5). Residents' support is required, although two of five serving headmen had been proposed by the District Office (p. 6). Where residents have dwindled the state has abolished the office: about seven Temburong posts went, and four Iban holders became village heads (pp. 3, 6). Membership has been shaped through citizenship and religion (King & Knudsen, 2021, pp. 19–21; Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah & Lian, 2023, pp. 290–291).

In the Kalimantan records, recognition attaches to the community, and the hierarchy recognised has a colonial source. The Dutch designated "superior headmen *pateh* and a few paramount leaders *temenggong*" (Pringle, 1970/2010, p. 157) and chose headmen to keep order in the late 1880s, and in 1923 Pateh Judan of Sungai Uti', regional head of the Iban, led their side at a boundary meeting the Dutch controleur attended (King, 1976, pp. 103, 107). Contemporary records describe the same ladder as customary. Menua Kulan and Sungai Utik, hamlets of one administrative village, Batu Lintang, belong to one *ketemenggungan*, a customary jurisdiction under a *temenggong* (Septiana, 2026; Setiawan et al., 2023). At Menua Kulan the *tuai rumah* refers what he cannot settle to the *temenggong* (Septiana, 2026); at

Sungai Utik the *temenggong* sets fines in consultation with the longhouse (Prasetyo & Suranto, 2021, p. 97). Decrees recognised the Sungai Utik customary community in 2019 and its forest in 2020 (Leo et al., 2021; Prasetyo & Suranto, 2021, p. 98), and Menua Kulan in 2021 (Septiana, 2026). Setiawan et al. (2023, p. 419) trace Sungai Utik to two founding groups, one led by a Pateh Judan. None of these records reports how the headman is chosen or paid or how he stands to the village administration, and none mentions the Dutch origin of the titles. Wong Garai, the one other Kalimantan community, appears in the corpus through labour migration (Wadley, 2000).

Read as a comparison of what the records report, and for the headship only, the three states' present instruments act on different objects: chiefly the office-holder in Sarawak, the office and its members in Brunei, and the customary community in West Kalimantan. Sarawak and West Kalimantan carry colonial designations of the office into the present; for Brunei, the records report none. In Sarawak and Brunei, residents' nomination survives inside the state's procedure (Beginda & Bala, 2022, p. 110; Pang, 2018, p. 6), and Sarawak's thresholds, ten doors in 1940 and, by an unsourced account, 20 families now, make the contrast with Brunei one of emphasis, not of kind.

Discussion

One source of the readings of loss is dating: Beginda and Bala (2022) measure the present office against an account in which the state's part is recent, so that appointment, allowances and programmes register as departures, although appointed headmen date from the late nineteenth century. Where change can be traced in one place, 11 changes can be judged, all in Sarawak: four lapses of rules on hill-rice farming and collecting, and seven rearrangements of rules on land, fruit trees and the headman's mandate, one known only through the press. Six rest on one study, where the earlier rule depended on whom one asked: in each area some interviewees reported a change that others, sometimes in the same longhouse, said had never occurred (Ichikawa, 2008, pp. 8–10). A judged change is thus the reading of those an author consulted, not a settled fact, and the balance also depends on counting Nanga Tapih's plots and common pool as two rules. On the unit, the rivers recorded share rules binding the *bilik* to the house and differ on land by the headman's authority, not by settlement history.

Since the late nineteenth century, at dates that differed by river, the headship has combined standing among residents with a part in state administration, and the baseline records it: in the Baleh of 1949–51 the headman's legal authority already rested on the government (Freeman, 1955/1970, p. 110), which had allotted the house's territory (p. 105). The state's part appears in 15 of the 29 changes in Table 3, one indirectly. Both committees reported as new came with the state, and the state dismissed, combined or abolished offices in three changes whose outcome for members is not reported. Today the two mandates meet in one procedure, nomination by residents and appointment by the state, in Sarawak and Brunei alike, except, by one unsourced account, in Sarawak houses too small for an official headman (Edward, 2020, p. 147). The Belait and Betong cases, one known through the press, show them diverging both ways and cannot say which is stronger; they suggest, as hypotheses, that the outcome depends on pay and on the documents headmen certify (Beginda & Bala, 2022, pp. 110, 112; Pang, 2018, p. 5).

In the records obtained, each state now recognises a different unit, and so defines what it can later count as lost: a headman without an appointment in Sarawak, a longhouse below the threshold in Brunei, a community without a decree in West Kalimantan. In Kalimantan, recognising custom may also formalise a colonial hierarchy, since *temenggong*, the title regency decrees uphold, and *pateh*, that of a remembered founder of Sungai Utik, were titles the Dutch conferred on Iban leaders. For policy, neither Sarawak's terms of appointment nor Brunei's threshold, liable to understate a membership that returns at weekends, can be revised well without residents' own views of whom they recognise.

Only 48 of the 145 records sought in full were obtained. The dating argument rests on three records, and the counts in Table 3 describe what the records report rather than how often outcomes occur; since lapsed rules are less likely to be recorded than rules in force, the inventory leans towards rules in force. The criterion measures the institution, not the population, and so cannot register depopulation as loss; it judges 11 of the 29 changes, six of them from one study. Land rights and resettlement were searched through one string, and resettlement rests on the two records on Batang Ai and Freeman's account of the Baleh (1955/1970, p. 105). The Saribas evidence on land comes from one author, chiefly two longhouses, the Saribas succession record from one author's family genealogies, and the Kalimantan findings from two hamlets of one village. The rules themselves were read through what authors reported: the codified *adat* of 1993 and the colonial compilations of *adat* rulings found by chaining were not obtained, and Iban-language material was excluded, so the review cannot set the records against the rules as written or as residents state them.

The agenda follows from what the 24 contemporary records searched did not ask, how residents weigh the two mandates, and from what most leave unsaid, whether the practices described are still enforced. Studies that record both, with each rule's earlier form and the disagreements among those asked, would answer this review's question; recording the house's rights on more rivers, including resettled and peri-urban longhouses, would test the range found on land. Such work carries obligations the records meet unevenly: four report ethical review or consent (Islam et al., 2020, p. 4; Kwok et al., 2018; Sebli et al., 2026; Septiana, 2026), five anonymise participants or places (Kelabu & Fadzil, 2019; Sebli et al., 2026; Septiana, 2026; Sercombe, 2023, p. 45; Wadley, 2000), and most report neither, although communities this small are hard to anonymise (Pang, 2018, p. 5). This review meets the standard only in part: it lists the successions in an Iban historian's published genealogies by longhouse and relationship without names, but did not ask the families concerned. Customary rules, genealogies and ritual knowledge belong to the communities that hold them, and future work should report consent, return findings to the longhouse, and let residents decide what of their *adat* enters print.

Conclusion

Three records, two of them studies of the present-day headship, treat the state's part in it as recent; the historical record, Freeman's own baseline among it, places appointed headmen in the late nineteenth century, under a Brooke rule that reached the Saribas before the upper Rejang, and leaders chosen by their peers before them. Where change can be traced in one place, all in Sarawak, there were four lapses of rules on farming and collecting and seven rearrangements of rules on land, fruit trees and the headman's mandate, six of the 11 resting on the disputed accounts of one study's interviewees. Elsewhere they show rules and offices

that members recognise, with no earlier form to measure them against, and two committees that came with the state. On land, accounts from different rivers and periods differ on the headman's authority and on reversion, and settlement history does not order them. In the 24 contemporary records searched, how residents weigh a headman they elect against one the state appoints remains unrecorded.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the University of Technology Sarawak Research Grant (UTS/RESEARCH/4/2023/14).

References

Ak Anggum, L., Abd. Wahab, H., Bunyau, W., & Kwok, C. H. (2015). Amalan kepimpinan transformasi dalam masyarakat Iban di Sarawak [Transformational leadership practices among the Iban of Sarawak]. *SARJANA, 30*(2), 1–13.

Appell, G. N. (2001). Iban studies: Their contributions to social theory and the ethnography of other Borneo societies. In J. Sutlive & V. H. Sutlive (Eds.), *The encyclopaedia of Iban studies* (Vol. 3, pp. 741–785). Tun Jugah Foundation; Borneo Research Council. https://gnappell.org/articles/iban.htm

Bahri, S., Lestari, E. T., Nawawi, N., & Paiman, P. (2025). The creativity of Iban sub-ethnic group of Dayak people community in maintaining and preserving customary forests in Sungai Utik Hamlet, Batu Lintang Village, Kapuas Hulu Regency, West Borneo. *Creativity Studies, 18*(2), 698–711. https://doi.org/10.3846/cs.2025.19186

Bedner, A., & Arizona, Y. (2019). Adat in Indonesian land law: A promise for the future or a dead end? *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, 20*(5), 416–434. https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2019.1670246

Beginda, P., & Bala, B. (2022). Kepimpinan tuai rumah dalam perubahan politik di Sarawak, 1963–2021 [Tuai rumah leadership in political change in Sarawak, 1963–2021]. *Jurnal Borneo Akhailogia (Warisan, Arkeologi & Sejarah), 7*(1), 102–114. https://doi.org/10.51200/jba.v7i1.4134

Bupati Kapuas Hulu. (2023). *Keputusan Bupati Kapuas Hulu Nomor 387/DPPLH/2023 tentang pengakuan dan perlindungan masyarakat hukum adat Dayak Iban Menua Sungai Tebelian Ketemenggungan Iban Jalai Lintang Desa Langan Baru Kecamatan Embaloh Hulu Kabupaten Kapuas Hulu* [Decree of the Regent of Kapuas Hulu No. 387/DPPLH/2023 on the recognition and protection of the Dayak Iban customary law community of Menua Sungai Tebelian, Ketemenggungan Iban Jalai Lintang, Langan Baru Village, Embaloh Hulu District, Kapuas Hulu Regency]. https://www.aman.or.id/files/publication-documentation/25526SK%20Bupati%20Kapuas%20Hulu%20No%20387%20%20DPPLH%20%202023%20Tentang%20PPMHA%20Dayak%20Iban%20Menua%20Sungai%20Tebelian%20Ketemenggungan%20Iban%20Jalai%20Lintang.pdf

Community Chiefs and Headmen Ordinance, 2004 (Laws of Sarawak, Cap. 60, reprint incorporating amendments to 30 November 2007). https://lawnet.sarawak.gov.my/lawnet_file/Ordinance/ORD_CAP.%2060%20LawNet%202024.pdf

Cramb, R. A. (2007). *Land and longhouse: Agrarian transformation in the uplands of Sarawak*. NIAS Press.

Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2022, May 29). *Key findings population and housing census of Malaysia 2020: Administrative district*. https://dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/key-findings-population-and-housing-census-of-malaysia-2020-administrative-district

Duile, T. (2020). Indigenous peoples, the state, and the economy in Indonesia: National debates and local processes of recognition. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 13*(1), 155–160. https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0034

Edward, R. (2020). *Adat Iban: A living traditional wisdom?* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Victoria]. https://hdl.handle.net/1828/12487

Freeman, D. (1970). *Report on the Iban* (London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology No. 41). Athlone Press. (Original work published 1955)

Freeman, D. (1981). *Some reflections on the nature of Iban society*. Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

Freeman, J. D. (1961). On the concept of the kindred. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 91*(2), 192–220. https://doi.org/10.2307/2844413

Griffiths, J. (1986). What is legal pluralism? *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law, 18*(24), 1–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.1986.10756387

Hasegawa, G. (2018). Iban *gawai* rituals in their twilight in Kapit, Malaysia. *Indonesia and the Malay World, 46*(135), 198–217. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1446420

Hew, C. S., & Kedit, F. (1987). The Batang Ai dam, resettlement and rural Iban women. In N. Heyzer (Ed.), *Women farmers and rural change in Asia: Towards equal access and participation* (pp. 163–219). Asian and Pacific Development Centre.

Ichikawa, M. (2008). Changes and diversity in rules of natural-resource tenure by the Iban of Sarawak, East Malaysia. *Asian and African Area Studies, 8*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.14956/asafas.8.1

Islam, M. R., Abd Wahab, H., & Ak Anggum, L. (2020). The influence of leadership quality towards community cohesion in Iban community in Malaysia. *Heliyon, 6*(2), Article e03370. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e03370

Jawan, J. A. (1991). *Political change and economic development among the Ibans of Sarawak, East Malaysia* [Doctoral thesis, University of Hull]. https://hull-repository.worktribe.com/output/4211950

Jawan, J. A. (1996). Conflict resolution through consensus building: Experiences from the Dayak Iban community of Sarawak, East Malaysia. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 4*(2), 121–127.

Kelabu, M., & Fadzil, K. S. (2019). Realiti dan aspirasi pembangunan masyarakat Iban di pedalaman Daerah Song, Kapit, Sarawak: Kajian kes di tiga buah rumah panjang [Reality and development aspiration among the Iban in the interior of Song, Kapit, Sarawak: A case study in three longhouses]. *MANU, 30*, 131–149. https://doi.org/10.51200/manu.v30i.1894

Kern, F. G., Holzinger, K., & Kromrey, D. (2024). Between cooperation and conflict: Tracing the variance in relations of traditional governance institutions and the state in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Third World Quarterly, 45*(1), 113–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2213636

King, V. T. (1976). Some aspects of Iban-Maloh contact in West Kalimantan. *Indonesia, 21*, 85–114. https://doi.org/10.2307/3350958

King, V. T. (2017). Claiming authority: Derek Freeman, his legacy and interpretations of the Iban of Borneo. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 173*(1), 83–113. https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17301005

King, V. T., & Knudsen, M. (2021). *The Iban of Temburong: Migration, adaptation and identity in Brunei Darussalam* (Working Paper No. 65). Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Kwok, C. H., Abd Wahab, H., Abu Bakar, S. H., & Islam, M. R. (2018). Community participation for rural poverty alleviation: A case of the Iban community in Malaysia. *International Social Work, 61*(4), 518–536. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872816673890

Kwok, C. H., Lyndon, N., & Abd Wahab, H. (2016). Program pembasmian kemiskinan: Penglibatan komuniti Iban dalam membuat keputusan [Poverty eradication programmes: Iban community participation in decision-making]. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 1*(1), 24–35. https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v1i1.4

Lang, E. (1998). Administration of native courts and enforcement of native customary laws in Sarawak. *Journal of Malaysian and Comparative Law, 25*, 89–126.

Langub, J. (2024). Native customary rights land: Indigenous perspectives. *Journal of Borneo-Kalimantan, 10*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.33736/jbk.7261.2024

Lavoie-Lemieux, M. (2025). *Iban en ville: Reconjuguer identité et appartenance à Kuching (Sarawak, Malaisie insulaire)* [Iban in the city: Reworking identity and belonging in Kuching (Sarawak, insular Malaysia)] [Master's thesis, Université Laval]. https://corpus.ulaval.ca/entities/publication/371889c7-5056-4a44-bbc7-985d5b1d901a

Leo, S., Supriatna, J., & Mizuno, K. (2021). A description of Dayak Iban's traditional knowledge on customary forest management in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science, 940*, Article 012074. https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/940/1/012074

Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah, & Lian, K. F. (2023). From migrants to citizens: The Iban of Melilas longhouse, Brunei Darussalam. In K. F. Lian, P. J. Carnegie, & N. H. Hassan (Eds.), *(Re)presenting Brunei Darussalam: A sociology of the everyday* (pp. 279–304). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-6059-8_15

Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (2010). A theory of gradual institutional change. In J. Mahoney & K. Thelen (Eds.), *Explaining institutional change: Ambiguity, agency, and power* (pp. 1–37). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806414.003

Native Courts Ordinance, 1992 (Sarawak Ord. No. 9/92, reprint incorporating amendments to 31 December 2017). https://lawnet.sarawak.gov.my/lawnet_file/Ordinance/ORD_NATIVE%20LAWNET.pdf

Ng, C. (1999). *Positioning women in Malaysia: Class and gender in an industrializing state*. Macmillan Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-27420-8

Padoch, C. (1982). *Migration and its alternatives among the Iban of Sarawak* (Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde No. 98). Martinus Nijhoff.

Pang, L. L. (2018). The tuai rumah in Brunei Darussalam: Continuity and challenges. *Journal of Borneo-Kalimantan, 4*(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.33736/jbk.1112.2018

Pemerintah Kabupaten Kapuas Hulu. (2018). *Peraturan Daerah Kabupaten Kapuas Hulu Nomor 13 Tahun 2018 tentang pengakuan dan perlindungan masyarakat hukum adat* [Kapuas Hulu Regency Regulation No. 13 of 2018 on the recognition and protection of customary law communities]. https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Download/96670/PERDA%20NO%2013%20TAHUN%2020

18%20PENGAKUAN%20DAN%20PERLINDUNGAN%20MASYARAKAT%20HUKUM%20ADAT.pdf

Prasetyo, D., & Suranto. (2021). Analisis faktor keberhasilan desa adat Dayak Iban Sungai Utik dalam memenangkan Equator Prize tahun 2019 [Factors in the success of the Dayak Iban customary village of Sungai Utik in winning the 2019 Equator Prize]. *Journal of Social and Policy Issues, 1*(3), 94–99. https://doi.org/10.58835/jspi.v1i3.22

Pringle, R. (2010). *Rajahs and rebels: The Ibans of Sarawak under Brooke rule, 1841–1941*. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. (Original work published 1970)

Rousseau, J. (1980). Iban inequality. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 136*(1), 52–63. https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003537

Sandin, B. (1994). Sources of Iban traditional history (C. Sather, Ed.). *Sarawak Museum Journal, 46*(67), Special Monograph No. 7.

Sather, C. (2006a). "All threads are white": Iban egalitarianism reconsidered. In J. J. Fox & C. Sather (Eds.), *Origins, ancestry and alliance: Explorations in Austronesian ethnography* (pp. 73–112). ANU E Press. https://doi.org/10.22459/OAA.10.2006.05 (Original work published 1996)

Sather, C. (2006b). Posts, hearths and thresholds: The Iban longhouse as a ritual structure. In J. J. Fox (Ed.), *Inside Austronesian houses: Perspectives on domestic designs for living* (pp. 67–117). ANU E Press. https://doi.org/10.22459/IA.09.2006.04 (Original work published 1993)

Sebli, L., Gembar, C. E., John, D. S., Jiton, C., & Dugun, D. L. (2026). Gender, customs, and oil palm: Reframing Iban women's roles in Sarawak's changing forest landscape. *Forest and Society, 10*(1), 232–254. https://doi.org/10.65844/2549-4333.1252

Seidelson, L. S. (2021). The new Iban bilek-family structure: A threat or the dynamics of our time. *Jurnal Melayu Sedunia, 4*(1), 259–289.

Septiana, N. O. (2026). *Perceptions and aspirations for forest management by the Dayak Iban community in Kalimantan, Indonesia* [Master's thesis, Wageningen University]. https://edepot.wur.nl/714779

Sercombe, P. G. (2023). Crossing the Rubicon? Maintenance and change among today's Iban in Sarawak. *Journal of Borneo-Kalimantan, 9*(2), 43–56. https://doi.org/10.33736/jbk.6211.2023

Setiawan, A., Najwah, L. N., & Fahadayna, A. C. (2023). Civil society, global environmental governance, dan indigenous people: Kiprah masyarakat Dayak Iban Manua Sungai Utik dalam menghambat laju deforestasi [Civil society, global environmental governance and indigenous people: The role of the Dayak Iban of Manua Sungai Utik in slowing deforestation]. *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional, 16*(2), 412–432. https://doi.org/10.20473/jhi.v16i2.51126

Soda, R. (2001). Rural-urban migration of the Iban of Sarawak and changes in long-house communities. *Geographical Review of Japan, Series B, 74*(1), 92–112. https://doi.org/10.4157/grj1984b.74.92

Soda, R. (2003). Development policy and human mobility in a developing country: Voting strategy of the Iban in Sarawak, Malaysia. *Southeast Asian Studies, 40*(4), 459–483. https://doi.org/10.20495/tak.40.4_459

Tamma, S., & Duile, T. (2020). Indigeneity and the state in Indonesia: The local turn in the dialectic of recognition. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, 39*(2), 270–289. https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420905967

Wadley, R. L. (2000). Transnational circular labour migration in northwestern Borneo. *Revue européenne des migrations internationales, 16*(1), 127–149. https://doi.org/10.3406/remi.2000.1711