



Structuring Cultural Meaning in Malay, Sakai, and Talang Mamak Leadership for Riau Forest Governance: A Systematic Literature Review

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A B S T R A C T

The province of Riau presents a paradox between economic growth and deforestation, a conflict rooted in the struggle between the forest as an extractive space and a culturally meaningful place. This systematic review analyzes how cultural meaning systems are structured within the indigenous leadership of three Riau communities, Malay, Sakai, and Talang Mamak, and how these meanings are reproduced or transformed in forest governance. Integrating Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology with Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, we synthesized 68 academic documents published between 1973-2026. The analysis reveals three leadership typologies: hierarchical-genealogical (Malay), centered on sako datuk titles and the "adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah" philosophy; communal-personalistic (Sakai), rooted in place-based ecological knowledge, as seen in Imbo Ayo Customary Forest management; and spiritual-ecological (Talang Mamak), manifested in melambas rituals and forest zoning like rimbo puaka. The reproduction of these meanings depends on key structuration mechanisms – rituals, knowledge-based conflict resolution, and intergenerational enskillment. However, this process faces challenges from state-induced authority fragmentation, aggressive land grabbing due to oil palm expansion, and a regeneration crisis exacerbated by out-migration. In response, communities exercise innovative agency through legal hybridization (e.g., using district decrees to formalize adat territory) and cosmological translation (e.g., reframing rimbo larangan as conservation areas). Yet these strategies carry significant risks of co-optation and cultural erosion when state logic overrides customary flexibility. The study concludes that effective forest governance policies must move beyond legal recognition to actively support local meaning structuration processes while acknowledging internal complexities and political-economic constraints.

A. INTRODUCTION

Riau Province presents Indonesia's most striking forestry paradox: it is a primary contributor to the national economy through vast pulpwood and oil palm plantations, yet it simultaneously holds an unenviable record as an epicenter of deforestation and acute tenurial conflict (Febrian & Mulianto, 2020; Budiono, Nugroho, Hardjanto, & Nurrochmat, 2018). These conflicts, often simplistically framed as clashes of economic interest, are at a more fundamental level struggles over the very interpretation and meaning of the forest itself (Reza, Bahruni, & Ichwandi, 2025). They do

not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are driven by the capitalist *space-making* logic of corporations and the state, which actively seeks to erase the *place-making* logic of indigenous communities (Peluso, 1992; Tsing, 2005).

Riau is home to diverse indigenous communities, with three native ethnic groups possessing distinct historical relations and forest management systems: the Malay (the majority group and heirs to sultanate tradition, distributed across coastal regencies), the Sakai (inland communities in Bengkalis and Siak, traditionally organized in *pebatinan* units), and the Talang Mamak (*Suku Tuha* in Indragiri Hulu, adhering to matrilineal kinship) (Asrinaldi & Azwar, 2018; Amady, 2022; Erdiansyah, Firmanda, & Rasudin, 2021). This clash of

logics is not abstract: it manifests in the physical encroachment of oil palm concessions into Sakai *pebatinan* lands (Justicio & Gunawan, 2025), the logging of timber from the Talang Mamak's *rimbo puaka* (sacred forests) (Pahlefi & Alissa, 2023), and the marginalization of Malay customary institutions in land-use decision-making (Putri et al., 2025).

This *place*-based meaning is sustained and animated through indigenous leadership institutions—*Ninik Mamak* (Malay), *Batin* (Sakai), and *Tengganai* (Talang Mamak)—who act not merely as local political elites but as “primary interpreters” and “key actors” bridging cultural meaning systems with concrete forest governance practices (Yasir, Firzal, Yesicha, & Sulistyani, 2022; Reza et al., 2025). Their authority stems from genealogy, ecological knowledge, or spiritual insight, each rooted in the distinct history and identity of their respective tribe.

However, existing studies on indigenous leadership in Indonesia have failed to capture this dynamic interplay between meaning and practice. Political ecology studies often analyze customary leaders as political elites navigating power relations with the state and market (Fadrullah & Syam, 2024; Musa, Darmawan, Fitriana, & Rizqi, 2021), but they rarely delve into the *symbolic reservoir* from which these leaders derive legitimacy. Conversely, cultural studies richly describe the values embedded in rituals and institutions (Kurnia, Dasar, & Kusumawati, 2022; Faizah, Elmustian, Auzar, Kurniawan, & Noviana, 2023), yet they frequently position customary leaders as mere executors of a static tradition, overlooking their strategic agency in negotiating, reinterpreting, and even transforming meanings under external pressures such as land grabs or migration. Thus, the gap is both conceptual and empirical: we lack sufficient understanding of how governance practices actually succeed or fail at the ground level, and no study has systematically compared these three communities within a common framework (Agrawal, 2005; Li, 2007).

To bridge this gap, this research applies an integrative framework combining Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology and Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. Geertz (1973) offers a lens for “read” indigenous leadership as a complex “web of significance,” in which titles, rituals, regalia, and narratives function as symbols that form a cultural “text.” Giddens (1984) provides tools to analyze how these cultural meanings are reproduced or transformed in everyday social practice. The integration of these two frameworks—which we term *structuring cultural meaning*—constitutes the theoretical novelty of this study. The empirical novelty lies in applying this framework to compare three typologies of indigenous leadership with different historical backgrounds and social structures within the same ecological region (Riau). By holding the regional context of environmental pressure constant, the study more clearly isolates how differing cultural meaning systems shape distinct pathways of adaptation and resilience, offering a nuanced contribution to the political ecology of indigenous forest governance (Tsing, 2005; Brosius, 2006). This integration is further enriched by the cultural geography concept of *place versus space* (Tuan, 1978): the forest as *place* is imbued with meaning and identity, while

state and corporate logic view it as neutral, extractable *space*.

Based on this framework, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How are cultural meaning systems represented in the three typologies of indigenous leadership (Malay *Ninik Mamak*, Sakai *Batin*, and Talang Mamak *Tengganai*) in Riau? (2) Through what mechanisms are these meanings reproduced or transformed in customary forest governance practices? (3) What challenges and adaptation strategies emerge in the process of meaning structuration amidst external pressures, and what are the internal complexities and potential failures of these strategies?

B. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review (SLR) design, chosen to conduct a comprehensive, critical, and structured synthesis of previous findings scattered across various academic sources, thereby enabling a focused inquiry into the structuration of cultural meaning within indigenous leadership. Unlike traditional literature reviews, SLR is conducted with explicit, transparent, and replicable procedures that minimize bias and enhance analytical accuracy (Xiao & Watson, 2017). This methodological rigor is particularly suitable for mapping existing empirical and conceptual foundations, identifying critical gaps, and building robust theoretical arguments from consolidated evidence, especially when examining complex, multi-dynamic socio-cultural phenomena as faced by the Malay, Sakai, and Talang Mamak communities in Riau.

Data collection followed a structured, multi-stage process based on an adaptation of the PRISMA protocol (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) for qualitative research. The initial stage involved systematically identifying keywords using Boolean operators to capture core concepts. The search strings included terms for indigenous leadership (“*kepemimpinan adat*” or “traditional leadership”), specific communities (“Melayu Riau” or “Sakai” or “Talang Mamak”), forest governance (“*pengelolaan hutan adat*” OR “customary forest governance”), and theoretical focus (“*makna budaya*” or “*strukturasi*” or “cultural meaning”).

Comprehensive searches were then executed across major multidisciplinary databases—including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science—as well as national repositories such as Portal Garuda and Indonesia OneSearch. This multi-source strategy was designed to capture a wide spectrum of relevant literature, from international publications to locally grounded Indonesian research, ensuring the review considered both global theoretical discourse and context-specific nuances.

The retrieved literature was filtered using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and quality. Inclusion criteria stipulated: (a) publication between 1973–2026 to capture recent socio-ecological dynamics; (b) empirical or analytical focus on at least one of the three indigenous communities in Riau; (c) discussion of cultural, symbolic, leadership, and/or forest management dimensions; (d) publication as journal articles, theses, books, or official reports; and (e) full-text

availability. Publications were excluded if they were duplicates, editorials, or deemed methodologically weak upon critical appraisal.

The initial search yielded 412 documents. After removing 78 duplicates, 334 documents were screened by title and abstract, leading to the exclusion of 178 irrelevant records, resulting in 156 documents for full-text review. From these, 88 documents were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria (e.g., focus outside Riau, insufficient depth on leadership or forest governance). This rigorous screening process yielded a final corpus of 68 documents eligible for in-depth analysis, with the selection process documented following PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability.

For data analysis, the study employed theory-driven qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2021), using the integrative Geertz-Giddens framework as the analytical lens. An analysis matrix was designed to extract data across two interrelated dimensions: a *Geertzian* dimension focusing on meaning systems and ethnographic contexts (e.g., genealogical symbols, cosmological narratives), and a *Giddensian* dimension focusing on structuration mechanisms in forest management (e.g., ritual practices, conflict resolution, knowledge transmission). Synthesis involved examining linkages between these dimensions to identify patterns—for instance, how a specific meaning (e.g., the forest as a sacred place) is reproduced through a specific practice (e.g., the *buka ladang* ritual). To ensure validity and reliability, the study employed source triangulation, maintained an audit trail of all procedural decisions, and engaged in discursive peer review to critically evaluate interpretive consistency. Coding was conducted iteratively, with themes emerging both deductively from the theoretical framework and inductively from the literature itself (Saldaña, 2021).

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Reading Forests as Cultural Texts: Three Typologies of Traditional Leadership Meaning Systems

According to Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, the forest is not merely a physical ecosystem but a cultural text read and interpreted through the meaning systems alive in indigenous communities. Analysis of the three indigenous communities in Riau—Malay, Sakai, and Talang Mamak—reveals three leadership typologies representing fundamentally different cultural meaning systems. However, it is important to note that none of these systems is monolithic or entirely harmonious. Each possesses internal complexities, tensions, and potential points of rupture that are crucial for understanding their dynamics under pressure (Li, 2007; Scott, 2009).

a. Ninik Mamak Melayu: Genealogical Authority as a Symbol of Historical Continuity

The Malay ethnic group constitutes the majority indigenous community in Riau Province, widely

distributed across the eastern coastal regencies including Rokan Hilir, Bengkalis, Siak, and Pelalawan, as well as Pekanbaru City (Asrinaldi & Azwar, 2018). Their traditional leadership is formally institutionalized within the *Lembaga Adat Melayu Riau* (LAMR), the highest customary authority at the provincial level, with a hierarchical structure comprising the *Pucuk* (supreme leader), *Penghulu* or *Ninik Mamak* (clan leaders), and *Jenang* or *Batin* (village-level administrators) (Anwar, Sastra, & Zebua, 2019). Within this structure, the *Ninik Mamak* operates as the core of a hierarchical-genealogical system, with authority sourced from matrilineal lineage and inheritance of the *sako datuk* title passed down through generations (Faizah et al., 2023; Umar & Riza, 2022). Functionally, the *Ninik Mamak* acts as the "guardian of teachings" (*penjaga tunjuk ajar*) with authority over customary regulation, conflict mediation, inheritance management, moral education, and marriage ceremonies, all executed within the unifying philosophy of "*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*" (ABS-SBK), which integrates customary law with Islamic values (Wijaya et al., 2022; Mustafid, Gemilang, Putra, & Mawardi, 2024; Mughits, Syafruddin, & Fathorrahman, 2025).

From a Geertzian interpretive perspective, *Ninik Mamak* leadership can be read as a complex "cultural text." The ensemble of symbols—formal titles, traditional attire (*baju adat*), regalia, installation rituals, customary proverbs (*petitih*), and deliberative practices (*kerapatan adat*)—constitutes the "paragraphs" of a cultural narrative articulating deep-seated meanings about legitimate authority, social hierarchy, and a Malay identity grounded in Islam (Gafar & Syahrudin, 2021; Yanti, Nst, Octavianus & Mulyadi, 2021). Thus, leadership is not merely a political role but a living system of meaning continuously performed and affirmed.

However, hierarchical structures, while providing stability, can also be sources of internal tension. Educated younger generations or those with alternative economic resources may question land-use decisions offering direct financial benefits (Davidson, 2015). Moreover, integration with Islamic values through ABS-SBK can trigger interpretive conflicts when customary practices clash with orthodox religious interpretations (Bowen, 2003). Thus, romanticizing this system must be avoided. These internal complexities, generational resistance and tensions between *adat* and Islam, challenge the notion of a harmonious customary order. Viewing the system as conflict-free obscures the actual dynamics of power and value negotiation. Precisely within these rifts, a community actively reproduces, challenges, and reorganizes its culture—not merely inherits it passively.

b. Batin Sakai: Ecological Epistemology as the Basis of Communal Authority

The Sakai are indigenous inland communities residing in Bengkalis and Siak regencies along the Mandau River upstream. Historically viewed as descendants of mixed Proto-Malay and Wedoid groups, they have inhabited the fringes of the Siak Kingdom since prehistory (Hasiholan-Sidauruk et al., 2024). Their social organization is traditionally based on the *pebatinan* settlement unit led by a Batin, though major transformations from plantation industrialization and

migration have shifted their lifestyle from nomadic to more settled, with many remaining in remote *pebatinan* enclaves (Amady, 2022; Justicio & Gunawan, 2025; Porath, 2002). In contrast to the hierarchical Malay structure, Batin leadership represents a distinctly communal-personalistic meaning system: authority is not inherited genealogically but earned through community recognition of an individual's deep ecological knowledge. The Batin is seen as the personification of the intimate relationship between community and living space, with legitimacy performative and contingent upon sustained wisdom and service (Zurba et al., 2024).

The core of this authority stems from the proven ability to "read" the forest—an embodied, place-based knowledge encompassing seasonal signs (*petunjuk alam*), sacred zones (*kawasan larangan*), sustainable harvest limits, and local resource regeneration cycles (Thammanu et al., 2021). This knowledge is embedded in daily practice, as seen in the management of the Imbo Ayo Customary Forest (Amady, 2022). Consequently, the Batin becomes a living symbol of "place-based knowledge," articulating communal values of simplicity, practical wisdom, and egalitarianism through proximity and collaboration rather than rigid hierarchy. In this system, the forest itself is a co-participant in governance, and the Batin serves as its skilled interpreter and steward.

However, this system is not without internal loopholes. Egalitarian ideals can mask practical inequalities. The ecological knowledge on which Batin authority rests is unevenly distributed: the older generation possesses it while the younger generation often does not, setting the stage for a regeneration crisis. Not all community members have equal access to this knowledge, and some families may be closer to it, potentially influencing decisions (Li, 2007). Moreover, the transition to sedentary life has created new forms of social stratification, with some families gaining greater access to formal education or plantation work, thus generating an uneven dependence on Batin authority (Elmhirst, 2026). In other words, ecological and economic change restructures internal power relations, where unequal access to knowledge and resources tacitly undermines the community's supposedly egalitarian ideals.

c. *Tengganai* Talang Mamak: Spiritual Cosmology as a Framework of Transcendental Authority

The Talang Mamak are a remote indigenous community, often referred to as *Suku Tuha* (the Ancient Tribe), inhabiting the lowland forests of central Sumatra, primarily in Indragiri Hulu and Indragiri Hilir regencies of Riau and partly in Jambi (Erdiansyah, Firmada, & Rasudin, 2021). Categorized as part of the Proto-Malay (*Melayu Tua*) group, the term "Talang Mamak" means "the mother's field," referencing their matrilineal kinship system (Erawati, Zulfa, Rudagi, & Rahmat, 2024). As the *Suku Tuha*, they are considered the first settlers with historical rights over natural resources in the Indragiri region (Wijaya et al., 2022). Their leadership, the *Tengganai*, operates within a spiritual-ecological meaning system connecting three cosmic dimensions: humans (*dunia nyata*), the physical world (*dunia tengah*),

and the spirit world (*dunia atas*). As a sacred mediator, the *Tengganai* is both symbol and guardian of harmony within this cosmological network, where every forest activity requires a "permission-asking" ritual led by the *Tengganai* (Titisari et al., 2018; Niko, 2025).

Rituals such as *melambas*, *manumbai*, and *basolang menugal* function as living "sacred texts" communicating ecological ethics and cosmological knowledge, institutionalized in their forest zoning system (customary forest, *rimbo puaka*, sacred land, and cultivation land) (Erdiansyah et al., 2021). The forest is not merely a resource but a kin entity; *rimbo larangan* (forbidden forest) expresses a sacred relationship with ancestors (Muntaza, 2022). This spiritual-ecological system also appears in the Orang Rimba forest classification in Jambi—*bungaron* (sacred primary forest), *tenggelou* (hunting forest), and *subon* (swampy forest)—each with rituals led by the *tengganai* (Tresno et al., 2022). Collectively, the three leadership typologies—hierarchical-genealogical (Malay), communal-personalistic (Sakai), and spiritual-ecological (Talang Mamak)—demonstrate that the forest is never a mere material object but a subject within complex social and cosmological relations. Conservation success depends on reading the "forest text" according to each community's distinct cultural grammar rather than imposing a single external interpretation.

However, this spiritual-ecological system is subject to internal contestation. The introduction of world religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, has created divisions within some Talang Mamak communities, with converts rejecting the *Tengganai*'s authority and associated rituals as "backward" or "un-Islamic" (Duncan, 2004). This religious conversion can abandon traditional forest conservation practices, as spiritual sanctions protecting *rimbo puaka* lose their power. Furthermore, the *Tengganai*'s role as sole mediator creates a dangerous dependency: if the leader is weak or compromised, the community becomes vulnerable to external pressures without clear decision-making structures (Scott, 2009). Thus, this seemingly holistic system possesses structural fragility points exploitable by external changes. This analysis reveals that each system, far from harmonious, contains internal tensions and potential rupture points crucial for understanding their dynamics under pressure.

2. Structuring Meaning: Cultural Reproduction Mechanisms in Forest Governance Practices

According to Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, cultural meaning systems cannot survive without repetitive social practices that reproduce them. An integrative Geertz-Giddens analysis reveals that the effectiveness of indigenous leadership in forest management depends heavily on their capacity to animate cultural symbols through concrete actions in specific spaces and times, embedded within customary forest management systems. Three main meaning structuration mechanisms are identified:

a. Ritual as Performativitas that Animates Cosmology

Ritual functions as a fundamental mechanism in reproducing and maintaining cultural meaning systems, serving as a primary vehicle for the performative enactment of cosmology. For the Talang Mamak community, the "*buka ladang*" (forest-opening) ritual led by the Tenganai is not merely a technical agricultural ceremony but a complex structuration practice embedded within their intricate forest zoning system, which divides the landscape into sacred forests (*rimba puaka*), customary forests, sacred land, and cultivation areas, each with strict spiritual rules and taboos (Erdiansyah et al., 2021).

To illustrate, consider the *basolang menugal* ritual in detail. This pre-planting ceremony involves the Tenganai leading the community to the edge of the cultivation area. He recites specific mantras that invoke the ancestors and the spirits of the forest, asking for permission to use the land and for protection of the crops. Offerings of rice, betel nut, and tobacco are placed at the base of a large tree, marking the boundary between the human domain and the spirit domain (Titisari et al., 2018). During this ritual, the Tenganai explicitly reminds participants of the boundaries of the *rimbo puaka*, which must not be cleared, and reiterates the types of trees that are protected. This is not merely symbolic communication; it is a spatial and legal act. The ritual performance inscribes the customary zoning system onto the landscape and into the memory of the participants. If a community member later violates these rules, the spiritual sanction—belief in misfortune or illness—is activated by the memory of the ritual. In Geertzian terms, this constitutes a form of "thick description" made manifest, where ritual action communicates and simultaneously reaffirms the core

values and beliefs underpinning the social order (Mc Gregor, 2021; Jambunanda, Musa, Karimuddin, & Muparikhah, 2025).

This performative logic extends beyond elaborate ceremonies to include the strategic use of symbolic language. In the Malay community, the customary language (*petitih, pepatah*) employed by the Ninik Mamak during formal deliberations (*kerapatan adat*) acts as another potent form of ritualistic performativity (Asrinaldi & Azwar, 2018). This occurs within the framework of institutionalized forest management, such as in the Kenegerian Petapahan (Imbo Putuih) and Kenegerian Kampa, where customary rules are enforced with strict sanctions. In this context, language is not a neutral communication tool but an active medium that shapes social reality (Lillis, 2008), ritually reinforcing the hierarchy, rules, and Islamic-infused Malay identity that the Ninik Mamak symbolizes. The use of proverbs like "*sedikit mengesak, banyak mengubah*" (a little push leads to much change) during deliberations is not just advice; it is a performative act that invokes collective wisdom and guides decision-making towards consensus.

c. Structuration Mechanisms in Forest Governance Practices

Based on Giddens' structuration theory, cultural meaning systems cannot survive without repetitive social practices that reproduce them. Three main mechanisms are identified: conflict resolution as authority assertion, knowledge transmission as enskillment, and ritual performativity (summarized in Table 1).

Table 1. Typology of Meaning Systems and Structuration Mechanisms in Indigenous Leadership in Riau

Community	Meaning System (Geertz)	Authority Source	Main Structuration Mechanism (Giddens)	Main Threat
Malay	Hierarchical-Genealogical	Lineage & Title (<i>Sako Datuk</i>)	Language Performativitas, Formal Deliberation	Authority Fragmentation by State
Sakai	Communal-Personalistic	Ecological Knowledge (<i>Place-based</i>)	Knowledge-Based Conflict Resolution	Economic Disconnection & Livelihood Shift
Talang Mamak	Spiritual-Ecological	Cosmology & Sacred Mediation	Ritual as Cosmology Animation	Leadership Regeneration Crisis

b. Conflict Resolution as Arena for Authority.

The resolution of disputes constitutes a critical space where abstract cultural meanings are tested and solidified. When a Sakai Batin adjudicates a boundary dispute by referring to local knowledge of marker trees or natural signs, he performs a dual function: resolving material conflict while reaffirming his authority rooted in place-based ecological wisdom (Jannah et al., 2023). In a concrete example, a Batin resolved a boundary dispute by walking the area with disputing parties, pointing to a *tembesu* tree that his father had identified as a generational boundary marker, and noting slope directions and stream flows (Jannah et al., 2023). Every fair decision accepted through communal deliberation becomes a *structuration moment* strengthening the

leadership system. This process relies on strong social capital—trust, mutual cooperation, and participatory deliberation—as found among the indigenous people of Koto Village (Suwarno, Ikhwan, & Ariyanto, 2023). This exemplifies Giddens' "duality of structure": customary law guides conflict resolution, while that action reproduces and reinforces the structure (Suminar, 2020). A parallel process occurs in Malay society, where the *Ninik Mamak* leads *kerapatan adat* to resolve forest encroachment disputes (Asrinaldi & Azwar, 2018).

d. Knowledge Transmission as Enskillment.

The most subtle reproduction of leadership meaning occurs through intergenerational knowledge transmission. When a prospective leader—*dubalang* (Malay), *calon tenganai* (Talang Mamak), or *calon*

Batin (Sakai)—learns by observing and assisting a senior, they undergo *enskillment*, a holistic learning journey through bodily experience (*embodiment*) in real-world contexts such as hunting, rituals, or customary deliberations. This informal mentorship shapes the candidate's *habitus*, internalizing technical skills, ethics, and intuitive leadership "feel" (Monroe-Wise et al., 2016; Stawnychko, 2025). For a prospective Sakai *Batin*, this means years of forest walks, learning medicinal plants, animal behavior, and landscape stories. For a Talang Mamak *calon tengganai*, it involves countless rituals, memorizing mantras, and interpreting signs from the spirit world. This process is conservative yet creative, as each generation adapts knowledge to new circumstances.

e. Structural Dissonance: Challenges to Meaning Reproduction

Although structuration mechanisms have functioned for centuries, they face serious challenges creating dissonance between traditional meaning systems and new social practices driven by external forces.

1. Authority Fragmentation.

An epistemological clash arises between customary authority logic and state bureaucracy. Village heads and state apparatus often take over strategic decisions regarding land-use permits, reproducing state authority based on written law rather than history or cosmology (Nyathi & Ayodele, 2024; Musrifah & Syarifah, 2025). When a plantation company expands its concession, it negotiates primarily with the village head, who may grant permission contradicting customary law, nullifying generations of stewardship (Alam et al., 2019). This "statization" reduces customary authority to a mere bureaucratic extension (Subanda, Budiana, & Gorda, 2020). Despite growing recognition of customary land rights following Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, formal integration of customary institutions into state frameworks remains critically limited, positioning them as merely "complementary" actors (Suwarno, El Amady, Qomar, & Roslinda, 2026).

2. Economic Disconnection.

Younger generations moving into oil palm plantation labor or wage work halt subsistence practices like shifting cultivation, hunting, and foraging—the primary medium for reproducing spiritual relationships with the forest (Shephard et al., 2023). This disconnection is precipitated by aggressive land-use changes. Out of nearly 2 million hectares of traditional Sakai territory, only about 1,129 hectares (less than 0.06%) remain under indigenous control, with the rest controlled by plantation and forestry companies (Amady, 2022). Loss of ecological knowledge is not a cultural failing but a consequence of political-economic structures that devalue indigenous livelihoods. Without bodily embodiment in the landscape, knowledge of medicinal plants and seasonal cycles becomes empty discourse, vulnerable to being forgotten (Aswani, Lemahieu, & Sauer, 2018; Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010).

3. Regeneration Crisis and Unresolved Land Conflicts.

A regeneration crisis occurs when no prospective leaders are willing to undergo the long *enskillment* process. The allure of faster, economically rewarding careers outside the community and out-migration to cities depletes potential successors (Rao, 2024). The structural dissonance is most acute in direct land conflict with corporate actors. When a palm oil company expands into Talang Mamak territory, the *Tengganai*'s authority is tested not in the spiritual realm of *melambas* but in the bureaucratic realm of land permits. The forest as *rimbo puaka* (ancestral abode) is presented by the company as "idle land." These unresolved conflicts represent critical structuration failures, where external pressure overwhelms existing meaning systems (Pahlefi & Alissa, 2023). The Sakai struggle for Imbo Ayo, while ultimately successful, involved years of confrontation testing community cohesion (Amady, 2022)..

2. Innovative Agencies: Adaptation and Hybridization Strategies

Despite challenges, indigenous leaders demonstrate innovative agency, serving as cultural brokers connecting traditional logic with external systems (Giddens, 1984).

a. Legal Hybridization and Cosmology Translation.

Strategic adaptation through legal hybridization has two sides: innovative agency yet potential *institutional captivity*. A *Ninik Mamak* may use a Regent's Decree to formalize customary boundaries, but maps—tools of state space—can freeze flexible territories, creating new conflicts (Acciaioli, 2007; Li, 2018). Similarly, communities translate sacred *rimbo larangan* into "conservation areas based on local wisdom" for ecotourism proposals (Titisari et al., 2018; Yasir et al., 2022). This translation is not betrayal but intelligent representation, building bridges with globally dominant conservation epistemologies (Brosius, 2006; Tsing, 2005). However, this is not an equal negotiating space; communities are forced to play state law's game just for basic recognition. The label "Innovative Agency" should not romanticize acts of survival under extraordinary pressure.

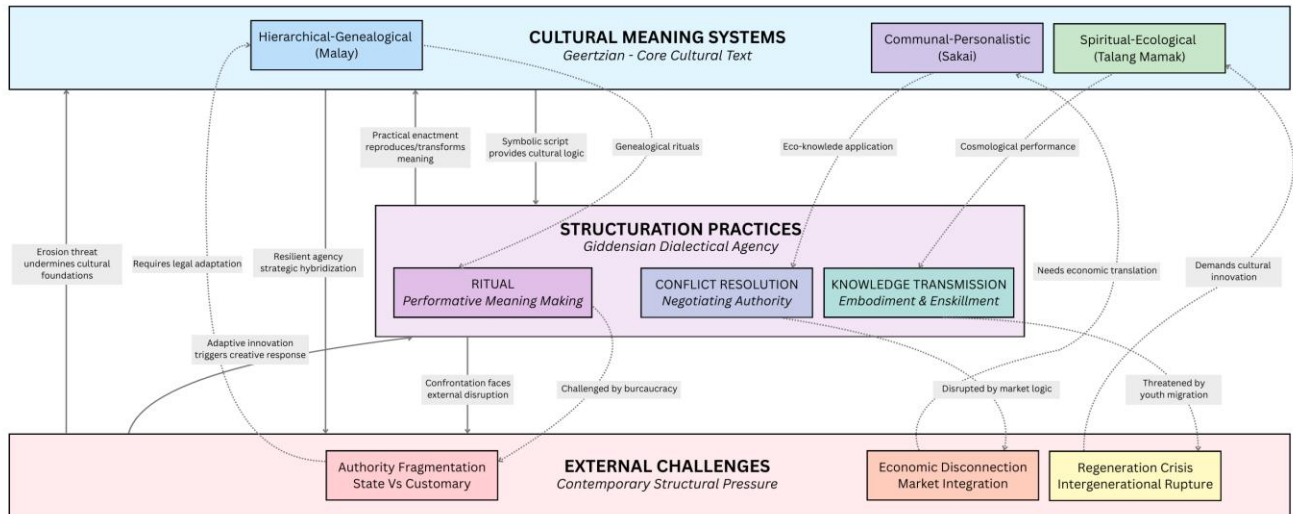
b. Collective Agency and Risks of Hybridization.

Through negotiation and hybridization, communities create a *third space* where authenticity and adaptation mutually reinforce cultural survival (Bhabha, 2012). Cultural resilience becomes the capacity to continually rewrite meaning through critical dialogue with contemporary forces (Scott, 2020). Yet hybridization carries inherent risks. Maps freeze dynamic territories; ecotourism can commercialize sacred sites, diminishing spiritual power if tourism fails or brings unwanted attention. This collective agency takes place in an unequal terrain where the state retains primary power to define recognition terms. Acknowledging these pitfalls provides a balanced understanding of indigenous leaders' profound challenges.

The adaptive and hybridizing agency of indigenous leaders—manifested through legal hybridization, cosmological translation, and collective rewriting of cultural texts—can be visualized as an ongoing, dynamic

process of cultural meaning structuration, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Model of the Dynamics of Cultural Meaning Structuring in Indigenous Leadership



(Illustration: A cyclical diagram showing four interconnected quadrants: External Pressure & Structural Challenges → Indigenous Cultural Meaning System → Innovative Agency & Adaptation Strategies (with risks of failure) → Mechanisms of Meaning Structuration → Transformed/Reproduced Meaning Structure, with arrows indicating recursive loops.)

Figure 1 Caption: A dynamic model illustrating the interaction between external pressures, indigenous cultural systems, adaptive agency (with inherent risks), structuration mechanisms, and transformed meaning structures. The model underscores leadership as an ongoing, precarious negotiation.

Figure 1 illustrates a cyclical, iterative model of the structuring of cultural meaning, as can be observed, among other cases, in the struggle of the Sakai community to secure the Imbo Ayo Customary Forest. External pressure in the form of a logging concession (HPH) fragmented their ancestral territory and threatened their livelihoods, creating a dissonance with their communal-personalistic system of cultural meaning, which views the forest as a living space, not a commodity. In response, the community, together with its Batin and NGO assistance, exercised innovative agency through legal hybridization by registering its claim under the Social Forestry scheme – a step that carried the risk of co-optation because it required accepting state-defined categories. This agency transformed the mechanisms of meaning structuration: traditional, knowledge-based conflict resolution (e.g., boundary discussions among elders) was now supplemented by meetings with forestry officials and lawyers. The outcome was a transformed meaning structure: the forest became legally recognized as the "Imbo Ayo Customary Forest" – still a place of identity and livelihood, but now also a legal entity as a "village forest" under a state scheme.

This hybrid meaning serves as the foundation for the community's subsequent responses to external pressures, yet it also opens the door to internal conflict if

younger generations regard the legal status as more important than traditional knowledge. Thus, this model is not merely an abstract cycle, but a concrete depiction of the lived, ongoing, and risky negotiation of identity and territory.

3. Theoretical and Practical Implications: Why Meaningful Structuring Matters for Sustainable Forest Governance

The Geertzian-Giddensian integration offers three theoretical contributions. *First*, it transcends the traditional-modern dichotomy: culture is a dynamic process reproduced through everyday practices, as when the Ninik Mamak uses a Regent's Decree to structure tradition through modern instruments (Li, 2000). *Second*, "structuring cultural meaning" moves beyond romanticized accounts by incorporating internal complexities, political-economic constraints, and hybridization risks (Table 1). *Third*, cross-community comparison reveals a metastructural pattern: despite distinct meaning systems, all three rely on analogous mechanisms: ritual performativity, conflict resolution, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. These findings challenge the assumption that legal recognition alone protects indigenous rights. The Imbo Ayo Customary Forest remains vulnerable because recognition did not address structuration mechanisms that reproduce leadership authority (Amady, 2022).

Successful policies should: *First*, protect rituals (*buka ladang, melambas*), deliberative forums (*kerapatan adat*), and knowledge transmission. *Second*, safeguard against co-optation risks when translating sacred meanings into state-legible categories, upholding FPIC. *Third*, support leadership regeneration by valuing traditional enskillment through school curricula or *magang adat*. *Fourth*, address political-economic drivers directly: land grabbing and oil palm expansion are primary antagonists of cultural reproduction. As the Sakai case shows, when only 0.06% of traditional territory remains,

cultural meaning systems cannot remain intact (Amady, 2022; Rahmi et al., 2020). Ultimately, sustainable forest governance hinges on supporting living processes rather than mapping static territories. A forest structured through rituals and intergenerational enskillment is resilient; a merely legal entity is fragile. The challenge is to create conditions where indigenous structuring practices can flourish.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has analyzed how cultural meaning systems are structured within the indigenous leadership of three Riau communities—Malay (*Ninik Mamak*), Sakai (*Batin*), and Talang Mamak (*Tengganai*)—and how these meanings are reproduced or transformed in forest governance practices. By integrating Geertz's interpretive anthropology with Giddens's structuration theory, we have developed the concept of "structuring cultural meaning" as an analytical framework that moves beyond static cultural descriptions and romanticized accounts of indigenous harmony. Our analysis reveals three distinct leadership typologies: hierarchical-genealogical (Malay), centered on *sako datuk* titles and the ABS-SBK philosophy; communal-personalistic (Sakai), anchored in place-based ecological knowledge; and spiritual-ecological (Talang Mamak), expressed in *melambas* rituals and *rimbo puaka* zoning.

Despite their differences, all three communities rely on analogous structuration mechanisms—rituals, conflict resolution, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. However, these mechanisms face severe challenges from state-induced authority fragmentation, aggressive land grabbing, and a regeneration crisis driven by out-migration. Communities respond through legal hybridization and cosmological translation, yet these strategies carry inherent risks of co-optation and unintended cultural erosion. Three core arguments emerge: *first*, indigenous leadership is not merely a political institution but a dynamic cultural meaning system; *second*, the continuity of indigenous forest governance depends fundamentally on the reproduction of these meaning systems through structuration practices—not merely on legal recognition; *third*, innovative agency, while remarkable, should not be romanticized as it often constitutes survival under duress and carries genuine risks of failure.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature analysis rather than primary ethnographic fieldwork. We recommend: (1) in-depth ethnographic field studies to capture lived experiences of structuration; (2) comparative studies with other Indonesian indigenous communities; and (3) longitudinal research to track how meaning systems evolve over time. The forest conflicts of Riau are not merely struggles over resources but struggles over meaning. For the Malay, Sakai, and Talang Mamak, the forest is not an extractive space but a meaningful place woven into genealogy, cosmology, and daily practice. Effective and just forest governance requires creating conditions in which indigenous communities can continue to structure, restructure, and transmit their cultural meanings—on their own terms, despite the pressures that seek to erase them.

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