

Indigenous Family Business in Borneo: Navigating Ecosystem Dynamics and Cultural Renaissance

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This study examines how Indigenous family businesses in Borneo navigate ecosystem dynamics amid a cultural revival of traditional food practices. Using secondary research and a case study approach, it integrates place theory, socioecological systems theory, and resilience theory to explore the intersection of cultural identity, biodiversity, and entrepreneurship. Findings highlight four critical dimensions (people, place, strategy, and technology) through which businesses balance heritage preservation with market adaptation. The study underscores cultural heritage as a strategic resource, offering insights for Indigenous leaders and policymakers on fostering sustainable growth, resilience, and community well-being in complex ecological and economic systems.

Keywords: indigenous entrepreneurship, cultural heritage preservation, socioecological resilience, traditional food systems, place-based strategy

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous businesses are defined as enterprises primarily owned and operated by Indigenous individuals or communities. They frequently have strong links to the cultures and communities of indigenous people. They could integrate conventional wisdom and methods into contemporary business frameworks. Many concentrate on social entrepreneurship, which offers financial gains and positive societal and environmental effects. Indigenous businesses are involved in various industries, including but not exclusive to natural resources, handicrafts, arts, travel, cuisine, farming, expert services, and production. Three hundred seventy million Indigenous people reside in the Asia Pacific (Harrison & Harrison, 2019). In the Asia Pacific, business opportunities are vast (Harrison et al., 2019), and family businesses are critical to local economic growth (Zaini et al., 2022). In these family-owned businesses, indigenous family businesses are a subset. Indigenous family businesses are important as they contribute significantly to the local economies and communities. As Indigenous family businesses seek to understand the market and their key differentiators, they can leverage their diverse culture to exceed business objectives.

Borneo is situated in the Pacific Ocean's far southwest. Various environments, including coastal regions, highlands, and deep rainforests, distinguish its topography. Home to one of the world's oldest rainforests, said to be 140 million years old. It has a rich biodiversity, including many Indigenous plant and animal species. The hospitality sector has seen a rise in Indigenous family businesses. The resurgence of traditional food culture in Borneo, particularly in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, has brought indigenous family businesses to the forefront of a culinary renaissance. Encompassing approximately 287,000 square miles, Borneo ranks as the third-largest island globally. Politically, it is divided into four regions: Kalimantan under Indonesia, Sabah and Sarawak within Malaysia, and a smaller area belonging to the sultanate of Brunei. Borneo is a fascinating and significant Southeast Asian region because of its distinctive combination of natural beauty, cultural diversity, and intricate political divides (Britannica, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

The central qualitative research question (RQ) was:

RQ: *How do ecosystem dynamics influence Indigenous family businesses in Borneo as they navigate the cultural renaissance of traditional food practices?*

To support this research, the study draws on an integrated theoretical framework illustrated below.

FIGURE 1
INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INDIGENOUS FAMILY BUSINESSES
IN BORNEO

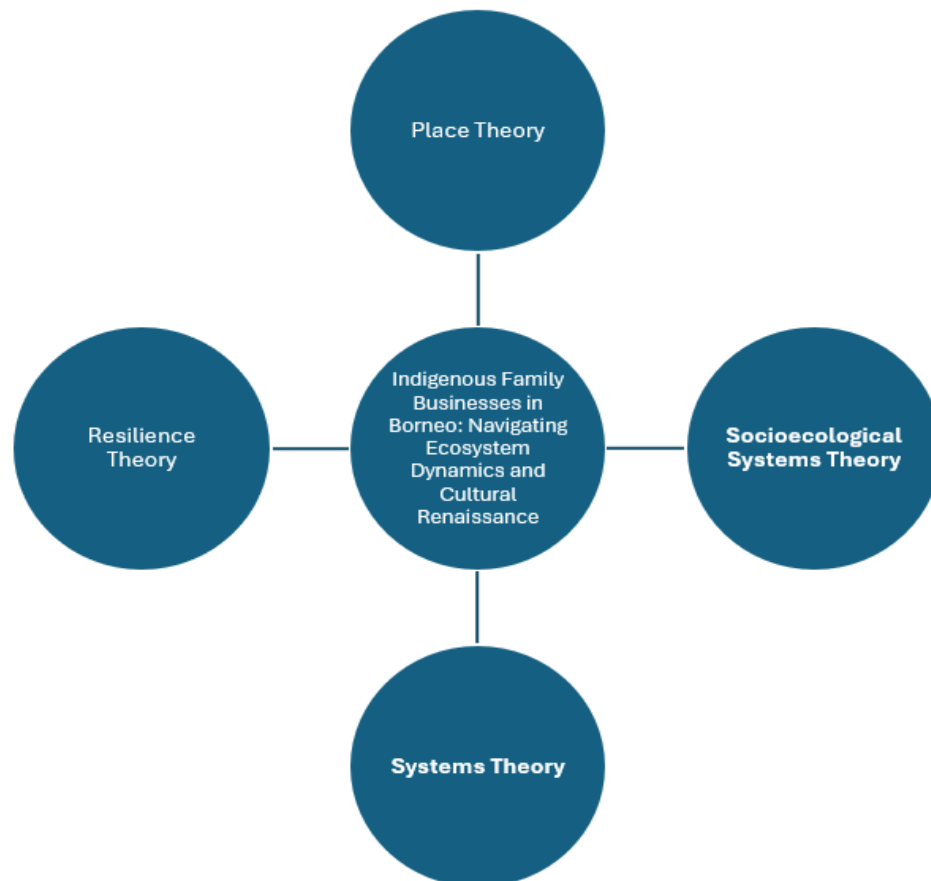


Image by Chinue Uecker (Author)

This research draws upon an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining elements to explore Indigenous family businesses' experiences in Borneo. Place theory provided a lens for understanding how cultural identity is ingrained in specific geographies (Carmichael et al., 2025). The socioecological systems theory captured the relationship between Indigenous communities and the environment (Manyani et al., 2024). The systems theory also helped identify why understanding Indigenous family businesses can explain the relationships with institutional, market, and community forces as they scale their businesses while preserving cultural integrity (Fubah et al. 2021). The resilience theory is essential to understanding how these businesses adapt to external pressures, natural disasters, changes in culture, and pandemics (Maguire-Rajpaul et al., 2025). This framework supports a more holistic understanding of how Indigenous family businesses navigate complex ecosystem dynamics while contributing to a broader cultural renaissance.

The research question is relevant since Indigenous family businesses' strategic and operational activities are impacted by the local and global ecosystem in which they operate. The study findings may cultivate innovative strategies for other Indigenous family businesses in different geographical areas to sustain their growth. The framework developed might help future Indigenous family business leaders. Researching this phenomenon is suitable to gather detailed strategies and practices that have enabled the indigenous family business to thrive.

The research uncovers the complex interplay between cultural identity, environmental sustainability, and economic viability through a qualitative approach involving secondary research of indigenous entrepreneurs, chefs, and tribal elders. The case study design supported this study, which focused on using a single geographic area to provide detailed strategies and practices that have enabled Indigenous family businesses to survive and adapt for centuries.

The researcher collected information about indigenous family businesses using three source types: academic publications, news articles, and historical organizational publications. The keywords were:

- Indigenous family business
- Asia
- Leadership lessons
- Business strategies

Data triangulation was used to develop a rich understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999), precisely the indigenous family business's strategic and operational considerations in response to the ecosystem in which they operate. Based on the literature review, information was gathered and interpreted, and critical themes were proposed.

FINDINGS

The findings suggest that Indigenous family businesses in Borneo are leveraging their unique knowledge of local biodiversity and traditional practices to create innovative products and experiences while grappling with the tensions between preservation and adaptation. A framework based on people, place, strategy, and technology served.

People

Indigenous entrepreneurs, family members, chefs, culinary professionals, tribal elders, and community leaders are pivotal. For Indigenous entrepreneurs, leaders can leverage unique family member knowledge and skills passed down through generations. Indigenous entrepreneurs may need to adapt traditional practices to modern business contexts while fostering intergenerational collaboration and knowledge transfer.

Chefs and culinary professionals are valuable resources within the indigenous family business. They can collaborate with indigenous communities to showcase traditional ingredients and techniques. Innovative methods will surface as chefs and culinary professionals create new culinary experiences based on indigenous heritage. This will raise awareness about Indigenous food culture among wider audiences, expanding its visibility.

Tribal elders and community leaders serve as indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage custodians. They can guide and support younger generations in preserving and promoting traditional practices. Additionally, engaging with external stakeholders to advocate for indigenous communities' rights and interests will be critical to preserving the rich culture.

Place

Borneo's diverse ecosystems and biodiversity provide an ideal location to showcase its business acumen and culture. Carefully, indigenous family businesses can utilize the unique natural resources and ingredients in Borneo's rainforests and coastal areas. Promoting sustainable foraging and harvesting practices to preserve the environment creates a niche, highlighting the connection between indigenous food culture and the land. Indigenous groups of Borneo, such as the Dayak people, mainly depend on forest resources for their customs and means of subsistence. Hunting, gathering, fishing, and collecting forest goods are their everyday commercial activities. Indigenous family companies rely on customary ecological knowledge passed down through the ages. Their methods for producing and obtaining food are influenced by their knowledge of the local flora, fauna, and ecological processes.

To promote the Indigenous family business, leaders can participate in local markets and food festivals to showcase Indigenous products and cuisine. This creates opportunities for direct interaction with customers and builds brand awareness. This approach also fosters a sense of community, promotes the culture, and exhibits cultural pride among Indigenous entrepreneurs. These ecosystems are threatened by deforestation, climate change, and other issues. This might include changing long-standing methods or implementing fresh ideas to preserve food security and cultural customs. Native groups actively participate in conservation initiatives to safeguard their customary territories and assets. Businesses engaged in ecotourism or sustainable resource management may benefit from this. Certain native groups are investigating sustainable agroforestry methods that fuse customary wisdom with cutting-edge preservation strategies. This strategy can assist family-owned enterprises while preserving the health of the environment.

Strategy

Commercialization and market expansion are needed for survival. Indigenous family businesses can develop strategies to reach mainstream audiences and expand their customer base. By partnering with other indigenous businesses, they can create a more robust market presence through mutual collaboration. Additionally, exploring partnerships with established food and beverage companies to scale up production and distribution may help ensure that the indigenous family business resources are not spread thin and that strengths remain focused.

Branding and storytelling can be achieved by crafting compelling narratives highlighting indigenous products' cultural significance and unique qualities. Social media and digital marketing help engage younger audiences, build brand loyalty, and attract customers. Indigenous family businesses can also increase awareness by participating in cultural events and tourism initiatives.

Technology

Adopting modern production and processing technologies to improve efficiency and maintain consistency is essential. While modern technology may seem more streamlined, indigenous family business leaders should ensure alignment with traditional values and practices to preserve culture.

Indigenous family business leaders capitalize on knowledge management and cultural preservation by transcribing family member practices and customs. Digital tools can document and preserve indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage, which can increase efficiency. Sharing indigenous food culture through online repositories and educational resources can reach a wider audience. Additionally, collaborating with researchers and institutions might promote indigenous culinary practices.

By focusing on these four key areas, Indigenous family businesses in Borneo can navigate the complex ecosystem dynamics and leverage the ongoing cultural renaissance to create sustainable and culturally meaningful ventures.

DISCUSSION

This study explores how these focal groups are influenced by the dynamic ecosystem in which they operate, characterized by a renewed interest in indigenous heritage, the challenges of commercialization, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, while disruptive, has also served as a catalyst for younger generations to reconnect with their roots and explore entrepreneurial opportunities in the indigenous food sector. Our research shows that environmental dynamics are critical as indigenous family enterprises in Borneo negotiate the cultural rebirth of traditional food practices. Our study revealed that indigenous family enterprises exhibit astounding flexibility in shifting ecological dynamics. For example, several Dayak households have adjusted their shifting agriculture techniques to retain traditional crop diversification while accommodating limited land availability. They can maintain their traditional eating customs despite external constraints because of their adaptive resilience. The COVID-19 epidemic sparked younger generations' surprising resurgence of interest in traditional culinary practices. During lockdowns, they saw a 30% increase in social media posts about traditional Bornean cuisine and a spike in youth-led initiatives to record and revive indigenous dishes. According to this pattern, it is possible for ecological disturbances to promote the transfer of information between generations paradoxically. Indigenous family companies struggle to preserve ecological sustainability when marketing traditional food techniques. For instance, households have been forced to create sustainable gardening techniques due to overharvesting in certain places and the rising demand for wild ferns in urban markets. This emphasizes how carefully business opportunity and environmental protection must coexist. These findings underline the intricate interplay between environmental dynamics, cultural preservation, and economic adaptability in Borneo's indigenous food industry. Although many obstacles are associated with environmental changes, there are also chances for creativity and cultural revival.

Limitations

The study is constrained by its reliance on secondary data sources, which may contain biases or subjective interpretations. Data gaps could also affect the study's findings. Furthermore, the study's focus on existing data may limit the depth of analysis and overlook nuanced aspects of the phenomenon.

Future Research

Future research may incorporate a comparative analysis across various market sectors to enhance understanding of business innovation among Indigenous family businesses in the Asia Pacific. This analysis should include cultural influences, governmental policies, and economic landscapes. Additionally, exploring technology adoption, financial accessibility, and environmental sustainability practices can offer deeper insights into the dynamics of Indigenous entrepreneurship across diverse sectors. Subsequent studies have to investigate how governmental frameworks might assist native family companies in managing these situations while safeguarding their cultural legacy.

Contributions

Indigenous family businesses from Asia Pacific would inspire readers interested in business, preserving history, and honoring culture. The Indigenous family business has served and adapted to evolving times. The research provides insights into the indigenous family business's strategies, focusing on knowledge of local biodiversity and traditional practices to create innovative products and experiences. Moreover, it would highlight how indigenous family business leaders grapple with the tensions between preservation and adaptation for long-term survival.

Practical Implications

The study of indigenous family businesses provides valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the innovation and success of a family business. The study highlights the importance of focusing on local biodiversity, traditional practices, and culture in driving competitive advantage and sustainability. This study explores indigenous family business practices and cultural preservation research as a new field. The

study provides practical insights for Indigenous entrepreneurs and business leaders on developing a sustainable and resilient business model. The study also emphasizes the need for indigenous family businesses to innovate while preserving their culture to spark creativity and remain competitive in a rapidly changing marketplace.

However, these businesses' long-term success depends on navigating ecosystem dynamics, including reaching mainstream audiences, securing funding and support, and balancing cultural authenticity with market demands. Economic strategies that preserve Indigenous populations' culture support Indigenous family businesses' ability to foster growth and survive (*A Manual for National Human Rights Institutions, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, n.d.). The study contributes to understanding how Indigenous entrepreneurship can foster sustainable development and cultural resilience in the face of global challenges, offering valuable perspectives for local communities, businesses, and researchers interested in the intersection of business, culture, and the environment.

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