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Social Geography of Life on the Border in the Configuration of the Socio-Cultural Spatial Arrangement of Island Communities

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Abstract

Sebatik Island in North Kalimantan is an Indonesia–Malaysia border area with a strategic position and socio-cultural complexity. The phenomenon of "one island, two countries" makes Sebatik a space for multi-ethnic interaction, particularly between the Javanese community as transmigrants and the Tidung community as indigenous people. This study aims to analyze the configuration of the socio-cultural spatial order in East Sebatik and explain the mechanisms that enable the formation of a neutral living space as a basis for social cohesion. The method used is a literature study with a qualitative-descriptive approach. The analysis was conducted interpretively on literature on social geography, spatial anthropology, and border community dynamics to identify patterns of cultural interaction, economic cooperation, and spatial adaptation. The results show that the social space in East Sebatik was formed through three main mechanisms. First, integrative settlements and inclusive public spaces function as arenas for identity negotiation. Second, cultural exchange through religious rituals, mutual assistance, and agrarian-maritime trade strengthens interethnic solidarity. Third, deliberative forums, shared spiritual practices, and interethnic marriages strengthen spatial adaptation and social cohesion. The study concludes that East Sebatik reflects a model of neutral living space at the border, formed through everyday social practices. These findings imply the importance of inclusive, responsive, and solidarity-based border development policies.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the socio-cultural life of the people inhabiting Sebatik Island. Sebatik Island is one of Indonesia's outermost islands, located north of North Kalimantan Province and bordering Sabah, Malaysia. Its location at 4°10' north latitude and 117°45' east longitude makes it a strategic meeting point between the two countries. The island is divided by an international border line that splits it into two administrative regions: Indonesia to the south and Malaysia to the north (BPS Kabupaten Nunukan, 2024). This phenomenon of "one island, two countries" makes Sebatik a concrete example of a border area that is not only geopolitically important but also complex in its social and cultural dimensions. On the Indonesian side, this 452.2 km² area is inhabited by more than 35,000 people and is often the focus of discourse on sovereignty and border conflicts due to the lack of control infrastructure and the unresolved issue of territorial delimitation (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025).

However, Sebatik is a strategic physical space and a social space full of dynamics. The community on this island is very diverse, consisting of Tidung, Bugis, Javanese, and other ethnic groups living side by side. Geographical and historical connections with Malaysia have made the national border more fluid in everyday practice, where residents often interact across borders through informal trade, family mobility, and cultural exchange. The border area here is a hybrid space reflecting social integration, not merely political separation. To fully understand the dynamics of Sebatik, a cross-disciplinary approach combining geography, politics, and social anthropology is needed.

Sebatik's uniqueness is even more apparent in East Sebatik, the meeting point between two dominant ethnic groups: Javanese and Tidung. Each brings a different cultural background, economic system, and spatial pattern. The Javanese community tends to be agrarian with a more organized social structure, while the Tidung community has a maritime orientation and distinctive spatial flexibility. Despite significant differences, there is no noticeable cultural or territorial dominance. Data from the BPS Kabupaten Nunukan (2024) records approximately 15,000 residents in East Sebatik, spread across a settlement configuration that reflects the adaptive interaction between the two cultures, both in social practices, the local economy, and daily life.

This situation reflects what can be called a "neutral living space," which is a social space where ethnic groups can coexist without one dominating the other. This space allows for a flexible social order, where communities adjust their social roles and positions based on their respective ecologies and needs (Reform, 2011). For example, the Javanese community is more dominant in the dryland agriculture sector in the interior, while the Tidung community dominates the fisheries and maritime transportation sectors. Joint activities such as markets, village meetings, and religious celebrations are carried out collectively, showing that social cohesion is built through the negotiation of identities and organic practices of living together, rather than through cultural uniformity.

More than just economic interests, this communal life is based on a collective awareness of the importance of maintaining social stability in a conflict-prone region. In border areas that often experience identity clashes, social cohesion becomes a strategic force for building community resilience. Taufanto (2025) study shows that social solidarity in Sebatik can reduce the potential for disintegration due to external pressures and identity tensions. In this context, East Sebatik offers a model of inclusive space based on mutual understanding, the ethics of coexistence, and cultural flexibility that has developed naturally amid geopolitical turmoil. From a theoretical perspective, the social geography and political space approaches provide an essential foundation for understanding this phenomenon. Peluso & Vandergeest (2001) highlight how space in an agrarian context is contested through power relations, while Soja (1980) explains that space results from constantly negotiated social practices. In the context of Sebatik, social space is shaped by dynamic interethnic interactions, not merely the result of state policy. This perspective enriches our understanding of border space as an arena for negotiating identities and interests, not just an administrative zone controlled by the state.

However, most previous studies on Sebatik have focused more on economic, security, or nationalism issues. Palentina (2016) discusses nationalism and feelings of marginalization in border areas, while Mastory, Kamaruddin, and Awaru (2025) examine interethnic social relations in the context of identity vulnerability. These studies have not explicitly explored how social interactions in Sebatik shape a neutral living space that enables harmonious coexistence. Even studies on participatory spatial planning in Kalimantan highlight agrarian conflicts without looking at informal social space management practices by cross-cultural communities.

Based on this gap, this study offers a new perspective by focusing on social interaction and cultural exchange practices between the Javanese and Tidung communities in shaping an inclusive socio-cultural spatial order in the East Sebatik region. Sebatik Island is positioned not merely as a geopolitical object, but as a social space constructed jointly by local communities through daily practices that negotiate identity and spatial functions. Using a social geography and spatial ethnography approach, this study aims to show how neutral spaces at the border can become models for harmonious and sustainable coexistence.

As a research direction, this study will explore how the configuration of the socio-cultural spatial order is formed on Sebatik Island as a neutral living space and how cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and spatial adaptation create mechanisms for interethnic social cohesion. The findings of this study will not only enrich the academic discourse on border areas but also provide practical contributions to the development of border development policies that are more inclusive and responsive to existing social realities. In the national context, the neutral living space model in Sebatik can inspire strengthening social integration and solidarity amid Indonesia's ethnic diversity.

2. Methods

This study's analysis unit is the socio-cultural spatial configuration on Sebatik Island as a neutral living space between ethnic groups. The focus is understanding how interactions between the main ethnic groups, Javanese and Tidung, create harmonious and conflict-free shared spatial practices. The study examines how social, cultural, and local value factors shape the mechanisms of coexistence that enable the creation of an inclusive social space in the border region. This approach is essential because border areas are often associated with identity conflicts, while Sebatik Island shows the opposite trend: relatively stable social cohesion and adaptability to change.

This study uses a literature review as its primary method. Based on theoretical studies and previous research results, this approach explored key concepts such as neutral living space, social spatial order, inter-ethnic cohesion, and spatial practices in border communities. Literature studies allow researchers to map relevant theoretical constructs while identifying gaps in previous studies (Ahyar et al., 2020) that have not discussed social integration much based on informal spatial practices in the Indonesia-Malaysia border region.

The sources of information consisted of academic documents such as journal articles, research reports, scientific books, and official documents from government agencies, particularly those related to social geography, spatial anthropology, and border studies. The literature was classified into three categories: (1) social space dynamics in multi-ethnic societies, (2) spatial practices of border communities and cross-border cultural influences, and (3) forms of adaptation and social cohesion in regions without a specific ethnic dominance. This classification facilitated thematic analysis of the factors that enable the formation of neutral living spaces.

Data analysis used a qualitative-descriptive and interpretive approach (Bennett & Elman, 2007). The process involved identifying key themes from the literature and synthesizing them to formulate a new understanding of how ethnic groups in Sebatik collectively shape socio-cultural space. Thus, this method allows for a comprehensive theoretical knowledge of the social phenomena occurring in border areas.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Socio-Cultural Configuration in a Multi-ethnic Context

Sebatik Island is one of the Indonesia-Malaysia border areas that reflects ethnic diversity with intensive social interaction. The population in this region is dominated by two large ethnic groups, namely the Tidung community, which is the indigenous people, and the Javanese ethnic group, which is the migrants who arrived due to the transmigration program since the 1980s. In addition, there are other minority groups such as the Bugis, Banjar, and Toraja, which also enrich the local cultural mosaic (Puryanti & Husain, 2011; Sitohang, 2022). This diversity is reflected in demographics, cultural forms, lifestyles, and ways of interpreting space. In daily life, East Sebatik displays a unique social dynamic in which people from different backgrounds live side by side in a relatively harmonious atmosphere without one group dominating another (E Hutchinson, 2017). This reality makes the region interesting to study as a model of coexistent multi-ethnic living space, especially in understanding how social and cultural space is configured as a container for equal social relations.

The socio-cultural spatial order in East Sebatik functions as a physical structure and a symbolic arena where values, identities, and power relations are negotiated and formed (Lefebvre et al., 1991; E. W. Soja, 1980). In the context of national borders, space becomes essential because it mediates relations between individuals or groups and carries geopolitical interests and national identity (Eilenberg, 2014). This study examines how the Javanese and Tidung communities articulate their cultural identities through settlement patterns, use of public space, and representation of cultural values in social space. By examining spatial settlement patterns, the distribution of shared social functions such as markets, mosques, and meeting halls, as well as daily practices such as mutual assistance and religious celebrations, it is possible to identify the mechanisms of social cohesion that shape neutral and inclusive spaces (Nurisnaeny et al., 2025). The findings from this study are expected to enrich academic understanding of spatial construction in multi-ethnic societies and serve as a practical reference for developing border areas based on the principles of social justice and recognition of cultural diversity.

The configuration of the socio-cultural space in East Sebatik is influenced by the characteristics of each of the main ethnic groups, namely the Javanese and Tidung, which have different cultural backgrounds and value systems. The Javanese community, as a group of migrants through a transmigration scheme, brought with them structured agrarian values based on the spatial order of the village. It is reflected in neatly arranged settlements with a block system, organized neighborhood roads, and a clear space division between residential areas, agricultural land, and social facilities (Sumule, 2002).

Source: Google Earth (2025)

Their social interaction patterns also reflect a hierarchical social system oriented towards formal institutions such as neighborhood associations (RT), youth organizations, and mosques as centers of communal activity. Meanwhile, the Tidung people, as a local ethnic group, tend to have a maritime orientation, with a history closely linked to rivers and the sea. They occupy coastal areas with a more dispersed and open settlement pattern, without rigid spatial boundaries (Geertz, 1976). The Tidung social structure is also more egalitarian, with fluid social relationships that depend on kinship ties and personal closeness rather than formal institutions (Suryadinata, 2004b).

Despite differences in lifestyle and spatial arrangement, some commonalities enable harmonious cohabitation between these two groups. One such point of convergence is cooperation and togetherness, manifested in mutual assistance, joint religious activities, and participation in communal events such as harvest festivals or Islamic holidays (Geertz, 1983; Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Public spaces such as traditional markets, sports fields, and mosques become inclusive cultural meeting places, where social interaction is built through economic, social, and religious activities (Van Houtum, 2005; Yusar, 2015). The adaptation of space also occurs gradually. For example, the Tidung community began to adapt to the Javanese institutional system for administrative management, while the Javanese community adopted the social openness of the Tidung community in their daily interactions (Abdullah, 2006; Sani, 2018). This convergence process shows that cultural differences are not a barrier but a source of social wealth that can strengthen cohesion and solidarity (Anderson, 1991; Barth, 1998). Thus, the socio-cultural configuration in East Sebatik has developed into a neutral living space that allows each ethnic group equal access and representation in social life (Marnelly, 2017).

The geographical distribution of the Javanese and Tidung communities in East Sebatik shows a pattern that reflects the history of gradual social mobility and integration. The Javanese community is generally spread across areas of the transmigration program, such as in Sungai Limau and Sungai Pancang, which were structurally designed with adequate public facilities (Ilham & Nurdin, 2022).

Sumber: Google Earth (2025)

Meanwhile, the Tidung people mostly inhabit coastal areas and older settlements, such as Sei Nyamuk and Tanjung Aru, which have developed organically based on traditional patterns and family ties (Alaydrus et al., 2025).

Figure 3. **Concentration of the Tidung population in Sei Nyamuk**

Sumber: Google Earth (2025)

However, settlement maps do not show strict ethnic segregation. Instead, in the last two decades, there has been a trend towards integrative settlements, particularly in new growth zones that have become meeting points between ethnic groups, such as areas around markets, ports, and educational facilities

(Saleh, 2015). It has created a more open social space, where cross-cultural interactions have become part of daily life (Van Houtum, 2005).

In mixed settlements, spatial interactions between the Javanese and Tidung communities show complex but generally harmonious dynamics. Shared spaces such as mosques, schools, markets, and soccer fields become central points of social interaction that transcend ethnic boundaries (Geertz, 1983; Lefebvre et al., 1991). Even so, symbolic boundaries still mark each group's cultural identity, such as house designs, street names, or distinctive ritual activities (Trinn & Croissant, 2009). However, these boundaries are not exclusive; instead, they foster a process of hybridity, whereby cultural elements adapt and influence each other (Fay & Haydon, 2017; Nash & Eriksen, 1994). For example, in the implementation of religious activities such as Maulid Nabi or Isra Mi'raj, a collaborative model is often found: the Tidung community contributes the venue and logistics, while the Javanese residents manage the event systematically (Agus Riyadi, 2018). Similarly, in-house architecture, some Javanese residents have begun to adopt the Tidung-style stilt house concept to adapt to local geographical and climatic conditions (Agus Riyadi, 2018). This phenomenon shows that the socio-cultural spatial order in East Sebatik is not static, but rather a field of negotiation between identities that continues to shape social cohesion contextually and dynamically (Ghafur, 2016).

Public spaces in East Sebatik play a central role in shaping the dynamics of inter-ethnic social cohesion, especially between the Javanese and Tidung communities. The types of public spaces that are shared are very diverse and spread evenly throughout the subdistrict, including traditional markets (such as Sei Nyamuk Market), mosques (Jami' Nurul Yaqin Mosque), public ports, village halls, and educational facilities such as schools and sports fields (Putra et al., 2019). Markets, for example, are a significant meeting point for residents from various ethnic backgrounds in buying and selling activities, which involve economic exchange, strengthening social relationships, and building informal networks (Granovetter, 2021; Johnson & Scott, 2001). Mosques function as inclusive religious spaces, where Tidung residents generally follow local Islamic traditions and can worship with Javanese residents who bring Islamic influences from agrarian cultures (Hefner, 2011). The village hall is also often used for village deliberations involving all elements of society, regardless of ethnic origin, creating an egalitarian deliberative model (Habermas, 1997; Luruk et al., 2024).

The main findings in this study confirm that the configuration of the socio-cultural spatial layout in East Sebatik was formed through dynamic interactions between the Javanese and Tidung ethnic groups who lived coexistentially. The spatial distribution of communities is not dominated by strict segregation, but instead, there is a relatively integrative settlement pattern with public spaces as arenas for negotiation and the formation of social relations (E. Soja, 2010; Suryadinata, 2004a). Cultural representations in physical space, from house architecture to shared cultural activities, reflect an egalitarian and inclusive living space (Eisenstadt et al., 2018). The process of adaptation and compromise in the use of space confirms that social space in Sebatik is not merely a product of formal design, but is born from social practices continuously negotiated by a multi-ethnic community in their daily lives.

By emphasizing that neutral space in Sebatik results from flexible social practices and continuous negotiation, this study reinforces the argument that the development of inclusive social space cannot be achieved solely through top-down formal policies (Lefebvre et al., 1991). Instead, living spaces conducive to diversity must be built and maintained through continuous social interaction, fostering mutual trust and solidarity (Putnam, 2000). Thus, the model of neutral space that has emerged in Sebatik can serve as strategic inspiration in formulating border development policies that are more responsive to complex and diverse social realities.

3.2. Cultural Exchange and Economic Cooperation as the Foundation of Community Life

In the context of community life on Sebatik Island, particularly in western Sebatik, cultural exchange mechanisms refer to a series of social practices that form the foundation of inter-ethnic integration, especially between the agrarian Javanese community and the maritime Tidung community. Cultural exchange in the form of shared rituals, collaboration in traditional activities, and intergenerational communication are not merely symbolic activities, but rather constructive mechanisms that strengthen social relations and collective cohesion in border areas. Through this series of cultural interactions, communities build and maintain social structures that are inclusive and adaptive to diversity, while maintaining social stability and resilience (Barth, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

Joint rituals, such as religious celebrations (Maulid Nabi, Isra Mi'raj) and traditional ceremonies such as harvest festivals or mappanretasi, are deliberately designed as opportunities for symbolic collaboration between communities. During these celebrations, the Javanese community generally presents the Javanese tumpengan tradition, while the Tidung community presents seafood dishes, symbolizing cultural dialogue at the same dining table. This distinctive touch reflects respect for each group's identity while fostering a sense of togetherness and mutual respect. Such joint rituals align with inclusive intercultural communication, as studied in the context of religious pluralism in Yogyakarta: open intercultural communication that respects differences is the key to strengthening unity and reducing the potential for horizontal conflict (Ali, 2017; Kim, 2001).

Source: Documentation of Activities of the East Sebatik Police Station

Traditional collaboration, particularly mutual assistance, is an economic and social practice that strengthens integration mechanisms. In East Sebatik, gotong royong is used to construct public facilities such as prayer rooms, village halls, or village roads. It is carried out collectively by residents of different ethnicities, regardless of whether they are Javanese or Tidung. This spirit reflects Indonesia's deep social values, where gotong royong is a form of physical work together and a manifestation of solidarity and interdependence in building a social order. Koentjaraningrat (2009) emphasizes that cooperation is at the core of Indonesia's cultural value system, which emphasizes togetherness, while Koopman (2021) refers to this practice as "social glue" that remains relevant in maintaining the cohesion of multicultural communities in rural areas.

Intergenerational communication strengthens long-term integration, especially in public spaces such as village halls, mosques, or schools. In these places, intergenerational and interethnic deliberations or discussions are often held to determine the organization of social activities, space arrangements, and even adjustments to the style of sermons to be more inclusive of local customs (Hymes, 2012; Ray & Sztompka, 1995). This type of communication internalizes the value of tolerance and broadens each group's understanding of the cultural richness of other communities, a social conservation strategy to ensure that cross-generational integration continues.

The economic side shows strong interdependence as a bridge of solidarity. The agrarian-maritime trade pattern between the Javanese and Tidung communities illustrates complementary economic integration: Tidung traders provide seafood, while Javanese traders offer agricultural products. It creates an efficient local economic chain, strengthens the sense of mutual need, and minimizes potential conflict. This kind of interdependence is in line with the concept of social capital described in the context of rural commodity trade, such as among seaweed farmers: personal and trust-based exchange networks strengthen economic and social resilience (Azis et al., 2022; Rasyid et al., 2022).

In border contexts such as the Wini Market between Timor Leste and Indonesia, interactions between communities are not only based on economic transactions but also foster social capital in the form of trust, norms, and networks that support harmony in a pluralistic context (Suwartiningsih et al., 2022; Yasinta Nuban et al., 2024). This model is relevant for understanding the dynamics of agrarian-maritime trade in East Sebatik, where market interactions are not merely economic but also a medium for reproducing solidarity between ethnic groups.

These cultural and economic mechanisms function as anti-conflict social glue, strengthening community bonds through symbolic and material interactions. Shared rituals become a means of symbolic integration; mutual assistance and intergenerational communication build structural social collaborations, while the interdependence of agrarian-maritime trade creates economic interconnections that strengthen solidarity and mutual needs.

Studies of various multi-ethnic communities in Indonesia, such as in Manggelewa (a transmigrant community), found that multi-ethnicity with a shared identity, mixed language, and mutual sharing of agricultural skills are significant dimensions for social sustainability. This phenomenon shows that intergroup bonds are driven more by practice than by similarities in origin, as seen in the integration pattern in East Sebatik (Ahmad Alwi & Resdati, 2025).

The mechanisms of cultural exchange through rituals, traditional collaboration, intergenerational communication, and agrarian-maritime economic cooperation are two pillars that support an inclusive social order in East Sebatik Island. They show that border areas do not have to be arenas of tension, but can instead be developed as neutral spaces, fields for cultural negotiation, economic solidarity, and peaceful coexistence. This model offers an important lesson for the management of other border spaces, namely that sustainable social integration arises from a combination of inclusive cultural practices and adequate economic interaction with a strong and mutually agreed foundation of social

capital across generations and ethnicities (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Colletta & Cullen, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

3.1. Adaptation of Space and Mechanisms of Social Cohesion in Border Dynamics

East Sebatik Island, located on the Indonesia-Malaysia border, represents a space shaped by geographical factors and social, economic, and political interactions between the communities inhabiting the region. As a borderland, Sebatik is not merely a line separating state sovereignty, but rather an arena for coexistence that requires continuous adaptation to geopolitical pressures and the dynamics of multi-ethnic identity. The geographical condition of the island, which is divided administratively between Indonesia and Malaysia, means that the people of East Sebatik must negotiate not only with limited resources but also with geopolitical tensions that can arise at any time. Therefore, spatial adaptation and social cohesion are key to this region's sustainability of harmonious community life.

The concept of spatial adaptation at the border can be understood as the community's efforts to organize, negotiate, and interpret their living space according to its geographical conditions and social realities (Lefebvre et al., 1991). In East Sebatik, spatial adaptation occurs through the flexible use of communal space, especially in areas that a particular group does not claim exclusively. For example, agricultural land managed by the Javanese ethnic group can also be used complementarily by the Tidung community to support economic activities. Conversely, marine products, which form the basis of the Tidung community's economy, often enter into local trade mechanisms involving the Javanese ethnic group. This pattern of sharing space is an ecological and social mechanism that allows both groups to maintain their livelihoods amid limited resources (Saleh, 2015).

In addition to the flexibility of communal space, negotiating boundaries between groups is also an important mechanism in spatial adaptation. In border areas, boundaries are not always understood as rigid, but rather as fluid and negotiable according to mutual needs (Wilson & Donnan, 1998). In the context of Sebatik, the boundaries referred to are national, social, and cultural boundaries between ethnic groups. For example, in farming practices, the Javanese community tends to control productive land in the interior, while the Tidung community is more oriented towards coastal utilization. However, these boundaries are not rigid dividers. Communities often depend on each other through bartering agricultural and marine products, creating a complementary economic relationship. This relationship shows that border areas actually form patterns of interdependence that strengthen social solidarity, rather than the opposite (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001).

In terms of social cohesion, one prominent mechanism is the cross-ethnic deliberative forum. This forum often takes the form of customary institutions, village meetings, or informal forums held in communal spaces such as village halls or places of worship. Through deliberative forums, differences in interests between groups can be negotiated, while collective decisions are made with consideration for the representation of various parties. This deliberative mechanism is an important platform for preventing conflict, as the community is accustomed to resolving issues through deliberation (Sumarni et al., 2016).

In spatial politics, these forums regulate the use of shared spaces, including land distribution, marine resource management, and social activities involving multiple parties.

In addition to deliberative forums, shared religious practices strengthen social cohesion in East Sebatik. The majority of the community in this region is Muslim, so religious rituals such as Eid al-Fitr, Maulid Nabi, and tahlilan celebrations often become occasions for cross-ethnic togetherness. The presence of these religious practices not only strengthens relationships between individuals but also reinforces the collective identity as a Muslim community on the border. According to Hefner (2011), religious practices in a multi-ethnic context often function as a "cultural space" that neutralizes ethnic identity differences. In other words, religion acts as a neutral space that allows communities to overcome primordial barriers.

Furthermore, social cohesion in East Sebatik is also strengthened by intercultural marriage. Marriages between Javanese and Tidung communities, for example, not only unite two individuals, but also create social bridges between broader groups. These cross-ethnic marriages produce a new generation with dual identities who can navigate cultural differences more fluidly. This phenomenon is in line with the theory of intermarriage, which states that cross-ethnic marriages can be an effective means of social integration in multicultural societies (Qian & Lichter, 2007). In the context of Sebatik, intermarriage expands cross-ethnic kinship networks, thereby strengthening social cohesion in the long term.

However, border dynamics also present their own challenges. As an area directly bordering Malaysia, the people of East Sebatik often find themselves in an ambivalent situation: on the one hand, they are part of the Indonesian national community, but on the other hand, economic and social interaction with Malaysia is inevitable. According to Ghafur (2016), research shows that the cross-border activities of the Sebatik community, such as trade, labor migration, and the exchange of necessities, are a form of adaptation to the limited economic access of the Indonesian government center. This condition gives the Sebatik community a dual identity as Indonesian citizens and part of a transnational community. Adapting to these geopolitical pressures requires the community to continuously strengthen internal social cohesion mechanisms so they are not easily divided by external influences.

The creation of neutral spaces is one of the crucial spatial adaptation strategies in this context. Neutral spaces can take the form of traditional markets, village halls, or social activity arenas that certain groups do not exclusively own. In these spaces, Javanese, Tidung, and other ethnic groups can interact equally without feeling dominated. According to Goffman (1963), such neutral spaces can be understood as interaction orders, which are social arenas where interactions occur with mutually agreed politeness norms. In practice in Sebatik, these neutral spaces serve as an important glue that ensures social cohesion is maintained despite differences in interests and identities.

Thus, the adaptation of space and social cohesion mechanisms in East Sebatik shows how border communities can create harmony in diversity through social strategies responsive to geographical conditions, geopolitical pressures, and multi-ethnic realities. Adapting space through the flexible use of communal space, negotiating boundaries, or creating neutral spaces demonstrates the community's ability to navigate limitations while taking advantage of opportunities in the border area. Meanwhile,

social cohesion, as manifested through deliberative forums, shared religious practices, and intercultural marriages, affirms the important role of social solidarity as a bulwark against geopolitical challenges and dual identities.

Within the framework of spatial politics, East Sebatik can be understood as a social laboratory that shows how border areas are not only objects of sovereignty disputes, but also arenas for dynamic socio-cultural production. The success of the Sebatik community in maintaining social integration through spatial adaptation and social cohesion is an important lesson for managing other border areas in Indonesia. It also confirms that border spatial planning is not merely a technocratic matter for the state, but also the result of the daily interactions of the communities within it.

4. Conclusion

This study confirms that East Sebatik Island represents a border area understood as a line separating state sovereignty and a socio-cultural arena shaped by dynamic multi-ethnic interactions. The resulting social spatial configuration results from ongoing negotiations between the Javanese and Tidung communities, who have built coexistence through cooperation, cultural exchange, and agrarian-maritime economic interdependence despite their different cultural backgrounds. Thus, interethnic harmony is not based on the domination of a particular group, but on the collective ability to create a neutral living space, adapt to change, and manage differences deliberatively.

The implications of these findings suggest that border area development should not only be positioned as a technocratic state project, but also as a social construct that grows out of the daily practices of local communities. Therefore, East Sebatik Island can be used as an inclusive, participatory, and sustainable border area management model. For further research, it is necessary to explore the dynamics of transnational identity and its influence on the social resilience of border communities, thereby enriching academic discourse and providing a practical foundation for development policies sensitive to local socio-cultural realities.

Declarations

Author Contribution

MFH conceived the research concept and design, conducted a literature review, and wrote the initial draft and main text of the manuscript. MHS contributed to the collection and analysis of supporting data and drafted the methods and results sections. WA conducted an additional literature review, prepared data visualizations (figures and tables), and assisted in drafting the discussion section. AA provided general supervision of the research, verified the analysis results, and provided substantive input on the conclusion and policy implications sections. All authors read, provided critical feedback, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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Figures



Figure 1

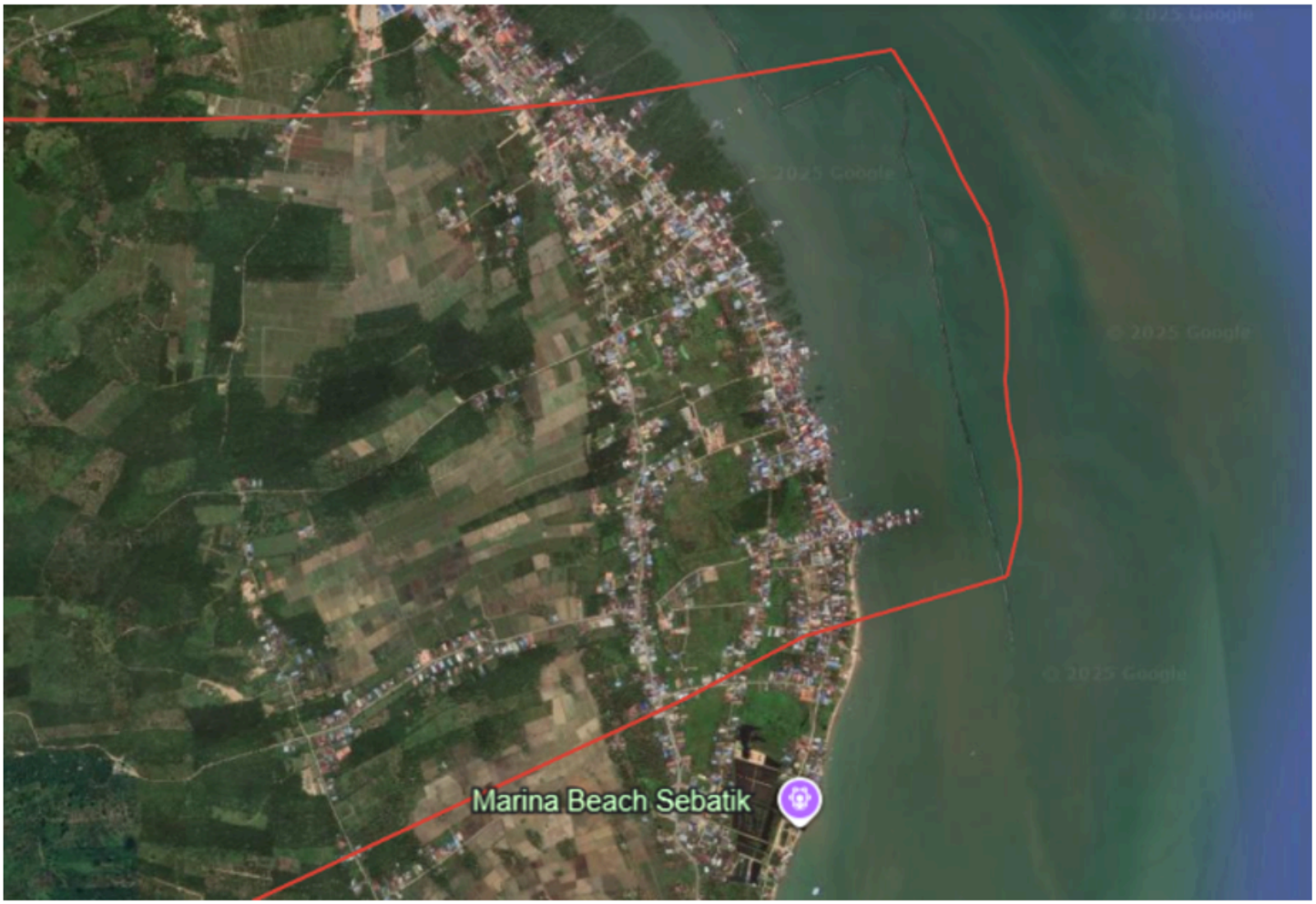
Satellite Image of Sebatik Island



Sumber: Google Earth (2025)

Figure 2

Concentration of the Javanese population in Sungai Pancang



Sumber: Google Earth (2025)

Figure 3

Concentration of the Tidung population in Sei Nyamuk



Source: Documentation of Activities of the East Sebatik Police Station

Figure 4

Figure 3. Maulid Nabi celebration in East Sebatik District