

Economic behaviour as cultural citizenship practice: Lessons from the Dayak, Malay and Chinese communities in Sekadau Regency

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Abstract

This study examines how cultural values shape economic behaviour as a practice of citizenship among the Dayak, Malay and Chinese communities of Sekadau Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Moving beyond reductionist and market-centred approaches, it treats economic activity not merely as rational financial action but as an expression of values, social responsibilities and civic commitments. Using a qualitative ethnographic-phenomenological design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 42 informants, ten months of field observation and document analysis. The findings show that local values, customary norms and social ethics guide economic behaviour in all three communities, producing a typology of cultural citizenship. The Dayak community practises communal citizenship grounded in customary solidarity and harmony with nature. The Malay community enacts ethical citizenship, integrating Islamic values, honesty and contentment into market conduct. The Chinese community demonstrates productive citizenship through disciplined family enterprise, trust-based networks and mutual assistance. Despite these differences, all three patterns foster civic consciousness, social participation and local economic stability. The study contributes to theories of economic citizenship by showing that citizenship is culturally embedded in everyday economic life and that diverse collective value systems can reinforce, rather than fragment, the national economic framework in multiethnic societies.

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Introduction

The study of the relationship between economic behaviour—defined as individual choices and actions regarding finance—and citizenship practices, which are understood as the actions and engagements of citizens reflecting their rights and responsibilities as members of



society, has gained increasing attention in contemporary literature. This holds particularly true in societies characterised by highly dynamic sociocultural pluralism (Boffi, 2025; Kafka, 2024). From a modern social science perspective, economic activity is no longer understood solely as a process driven by rational markets. Instead, it is viewed as an arena for forming values, identities, and civic participation within collective life. Millar et al. (2024) argue that economic actions contain intertwined moral, cultural, and political dimensions, meaning economic behaviour can directly reflect the quality of citizenship lived within a community. It is within this framework that the concept of economic citizenship finds its profound relevance, offering a structure to explain how individuals negotiate their civic rights, obligations, and responsibilities through daily economic activities across family, community, and educational spheres (Lash, 2021; Steyn & Vanyoro, 2024; Zou et al., 2020).

However, the connection between economic behaviour and citizenship has not been critically examined within multiethnic settings. Therefore, a critical question arises about economic citizenship behaviour: How do cultural values shape the relationship between economic behaviour and citizenship practices among the Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities in Sekadau Regency, Indonesia? In the Indonesian context, the interaction between economic behaviour and citizenship becomes increasingly complex due to multiethnic societal realities and rapid modernisation fuelled by technological advancements (Hidayah et al., 2025). The challenges of local development, free-market penetration, and the transformation of cultural values exert continuous pressure, forcing communities to adapt their economic behaviours.

Sekadau Regency in West Kalimantan provides a highly relevant representation for studying this phenomenon. The co-existence of three major communities—the Dayak, Malay, and Chinese—presents a diverse social landscape to observe how cultural values, customary practices, and historical experiences shape economic tendencies alongside the quality of local citizenship (Adi et al., 2024; Gandasari et al., 2024). Yet, despite these dynamics, existing studies remain largely descriptive and have yet to critically evaluate how specific cultural values generate distinct forms of economic citizenship. This empirical gap motivates this field research, which analyses how the interplay of ethnic traditions and sociocultural norms concretely shapes the relationship between economic behaviour and citizenship practices.

Generally, these three communities possess distinct cultural foundations when assigning meaning to economic activities. Previous studies (Murhaini & Achmadi, 2021; Nopembereni et al., 2019) demonstrate that the Dayak people frequently emphasise communal dimensions and solidarity in their economic decision-making. This is visibly mirrored in practices of cooperation (*gotong royong*), traditional farming patterns, and customary relations centred on social equilibrium. The Malay community, deeply influenced by Islamic traditions and individual or small-group social ethics, tends to connect its economic orientation to principles that bridge its original ancestral culture with Islamic practices, cultivating a disposition of contentment (*feeling content*) in economic endeavours (Mensi et al., 2020; Wan Husin et al., 2022). Meanwhile, research on the Chinese community highlights robust commercial networks and intergenerational business sustainability strategies, which are frequently structured through proportional financial management (Su et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, these tendencies should not be viewed as static or uniform. Internal variations exist within each group, and intercommunity interactions generate hybrid practices and evolving forms of citizenship that adapt as society progresses. Each value system offers a unique emphasis, yet their dynamic interaction is capable of shaping distinctive economic behaviours and localised civic practices (Kalogerogianni, 2025; Qi et al., 2024). Despite the evident academic importance of this reality, studies explicitly examining how daily economic practices function as a lived citizenship in Indonesia's multiethnic regions remain severely limited. Most economic research, such as Pirmana et al. (2021), prioritises the mechanics of production, distribution, and consumption. Production and distribution activities often focus

purely on increasing quantity while neglecting quality, which can diminish citizens' appreciation for domestic products. Conversely, citizenship studies frequently centre on legal, political, and educational issues, while rarely addressing how citizens manage household finances, such as saving, spending, and investing (Arfani & Nakaya, 2020). This dynamic gradually creates an empirical disconnect in understanding how cultural values and traditions drive economic behaviour as a concrete expression of citizenship.

To address this gap, this study employs a transcendental-hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigate the subjective experiences of communities and analyse how economic activities mirror their roles as citizens at both local and national levels. This research provides a theoretical contribution by offering a typology of cultural citizenship manifested through economic behaviour in multiethnic regions. By examining how the Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities conduct economic activities and negotiate civic values, this study not only utilises the concept of cultural citizenship as an interpretive lens but also expands it into concrete operational categories. This typology demonstrates that cultural plurality yields diverse yet interconnected forms of citizenship through daily economic practices—where market rationality continually negotiates with communal solidarity, religious ethics, and network-based trust. Consequently, this study offers a holistic framework linking economics, culture, and citizenship, thereby extending existing economic citizenship theories into a more inclusive and contextualised application within multiethnic Indonesia.

Method

This study utilises an ethnographic-phenomenological approach to uncover the behavioural patterns, cultural interactions, value systems, and structures of meaning that shape the economic experiences of the Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities. Within this framework, economic activity is not treated as an objective symptom detached from the subject, but as a daily-life manifestation experienced through consciousness, intentionality, and intersubjective relations. Guided by Spradley (2016) through an ethnographic lens, we engaged in prolonged field immersion to discover the collective action patterns, interactions, and webs of cultural values vibrant within the society. Simultaneously, using the processes of epoché and phenomenological reduction as outlined by Moustakas (1994), we strove to suspend prior assumptions, ensuring that the emerging meanings were genuinely derived from the direct lived experiences of economic actors and those closely acquainted with these behaviours.

We collected data through interviews and observations, with researchers immersed in informants' daily lives for ten months. In-depth interviews included 42 informants across seven districts in Sekadau Regency (6 informants per district). Researchers purposively selected informants to ensure variation in gender, age, education level, and occupation. Within each 6-person district cohort, two individuals represented each ethnic group (Dayak, Malay, and Chinese). The interviews were designed as dialogic spaces, allowing informants to reflectively articulate their economic experiences through their respective local cultures. Field observations were simultaneously conducted in marketplaces across the seven districts to capture actions, gestures, interactions, and economic practices that are not always verbally expressed, ensuring a comprehensive experiential analysis.

The data analysis process was conducted integratively, blending Spradley's developmental research sequence with a transcendental phenomenological model. This combination aimed to capture macro-level economic behaviours while simultaneously extracting the deep subjective essence of consciousness from the economic actors. The specific stages of data analysis were conducted as follows:

Domain analysis and horizontalisation. This initial phase began with a Spradley-style domain analysis to obtain a comprehensive, macro-level overview of the community's socioeconomic situation. Concurrently, using epoché and horizontalisation, we documented all significant statements from the interview transcripts while suspending any preconceived

assumptions. Taxonomic analysis and reduction of meaning units. We systematically itemised the broad domains identified into granular, structured taxonomic architectures. At this stage, we reduced the data to eliminate overlapping or redundant statements, isolating the essential units of meaning. Componential analysis and thematic clustering. Here, we analysed the components of our observations and interviews to map the specific, contrasting characteristics distinguishing economic behaviour across ethnic lines. Cultural theme analysis and textural-structural synthesis. In this final phase, we integrated all findings into a holistic cultural theme analysis, generating a theoretical novelty: the Typology of Cultural Citizenship. We finalised this step by crafting detailed textural descriptions (what was experienced) and structural descriptions (how it was experienced) to capture the essence of the subjects' deep experiences.

To ensure data credibility, we maintained consistent and meaningful communication with informants after returning from the field. This prolonged engagement fostered a strong bond of trust, deepened our understanding of the social and cultural context, and minimised interpretive bias. Data validation strictly followed the ethnographic-phenomenological pipeline: progressing from domain, taxonomic, componential, and cultural theme analyses to identifying core experiences via horizontalisation, and clustering themes based on recurring meanings in the informants' narratives. Textural descriptions of informants' experiences were coupled with structural descriptions of how their social contexts shaped those experiences. This combination yielded an ethnographic-phenomenological essence of what was experienced and how economic behaviour is actively structuralised as an expression of cultural citizenship in a multiethnic social space. Throughout the analysis, the researchers maintained a highly reflective stance, remaining conscious that interpretation consistently operates in the tension between the subject's perspective and the researcher's own horizon of understanding. To clarify this analytical flow, the synthesised method based on Moustakas (1994) and Spradley (2016) is summarised in Table 1

Table 1.

Data analysis stages integrating the ethnographic and phenomenological flows

Stage	Ethnographic Flow (Spradley)	Phenomenological Flow (Moustakas)	Operationalisation & Integration in Research (Sekadau)
1	Domain Analysis: Obtaining a macro and comprehensive overview of the social situation or research object through broad observation.	Epoche & Horizontalization: Suspending the researcher's initial assumptions and listing all important statements without hierarchy.	Researchers mapped large domains of economic activity across the three ethnic groups over 10 months of observation, applying epoche reflections to suspend ethnic biases while interview transcripts were inventoried equitably.
2	Taxonomic Analysis: Breaking down selected domains in a detailed and structured manner to understand internal cultural architecture.	Reduction & Meaning Units: Eliminating overlapping or irrelevant statements to isolate essential, pure units of meaning.	Identified domains were dissected into specific behavioural taxonomies. Simultaneously, interview transcripts were reduced to distil the pure inner meaning units of the economic actors.

3	Componential Analysis: Searching for contrasts or specific traits among elements within dimensions to map clear differences.	Thematic Clustering: Uniting similar essential units of meaning into substantial, cohesive cluster themes.	Researchers mapped specific distinguishing characteristics across ethnic groups (the Malay ethic of 'trading with the heart and feeling content' vs. the Chinese risk-taking ethos vs. the Dayak communal and natural solidarity). These were clustered into meaningful economic themes.
4	Cultural Theme Analysis: Finding the common thread connecting domains to discover an integrated, overarching cultural value.	Textural-Structural Synthesis: Compiling comprehensive descriptions of what was experienced (textural) and how it was experienced (structural).	Unifying the entire analytical trajectory into a collective cultural theme analysis that generates a novel typology of cultural citizenship (communal, ethical, productive), finalised with inner-world descriptions of how identity is lived at the grassroots level.

Source: Researchers (2026).

Results and Discussion

Based on the ethnographic (developmental research sequence) and phenomenological (transcendental-hermeneutic) analyses, the economic behaviour of the multiethnic community (Dayak, Malay, and Chinese) in Sekadau Regency is not merely an activity for material fulfilment. Instead, it operates as a vibrant space for articulating a lived cultural citizenship that is embedded within the 'self' of each individual through daily interactions. This study challenges reductionist formal market biases by showing that grassroots economic rationality consistently runs parallel with local wisdom, forming a substantive framework for economic citizenship.

Communal solidarity of the Dayak: The existence of being-with and social equilibrium

The Dayak ethnic group is widely known for its close relationship with nature, where their economic activities are predominantly seasonal and dependent on agricultural yields. Close observation of their farming activities, from land clearing to harvest, reveals a consistent pattern. Crucially, these activities are guided not by calculations of material profit and loss, but by reciprocal relationships that foster mutual benefit. Additionally, their economic hubs (though mostly operating once a week) are concentrated in local marketplaces across districts, and the Pasar Minggu is centred at Pasar Baru, Sekadau City. This phenomenon is supported by statements from informants JL, SF, and JRT, who emphasised that the Dayak tribe's economic behaviour serves not only to fulfil material needs but also to articulate civic values bound to cultural experiences.

Phenomenologically, an analysis of the structure of consciousness and interview transcripts reveals an experiential essence rooted in co-existence (being-with). For them, 'working' is defined as a moral and ethical responsibility to maintain social order, environmental preservation, and customary law. Meanwhile, another informant, AR, shared that economic practices in Sekadau display a configuration of citizenship negotiated through

daily interactions within both in-group and out-group spaces. Consequently, these findings matter because they help bind communities together. Amidst the massive expansion of palm oil plantations that introduces the individualistic currents of market economies, traditional economic practices act as a cultural defence mechanism. This proves that economic citizenship is not born out of formal state regulations, but emerges from local cultural commitments to maintain harmony across human relationships with God, nature, and fellow beings. Regarding this interconnected relationship, Heidegger (1927/1962) notes that human existence is fundamentally relational and cannot be understood in isolation from others and the world. This co-existence involves an ethical orientation where actions are guided not merely by instrumental rationality, but by a deep care for the sustainability of collective life, positioning economic behaviour as an expression of communal responsibility rather than mere individual interest.

Market ethics of the Malay: The principle of contentment (feeling content) and distributive justice

The commercial activities of the Malay community, which primarily operate on a small scale, are concentrated in the Teratai Market on the banks of the Kapuas River in Sekadau City, as well as various district markets. From an ethnographic perspective, the market is not just an arena for free competition but a moral space shaped by the syncretism of cultural values and Islamic law. During interviews, Malay traders such as RZ, SF, FI, and NH emphasised the importance of 'trading with the heart', maintaining honesty, practising a lifestyle of 'feeling content', and avoiding conflicts as a form of respect for long-established social relationships. According to the informants, 'trading with the heart' means prioritising long-term blessings (barakah) over aggressive, short-term, unethical financial gains.

Meanwhile, the concept of 'feeling content' relates to values of sufficiency, acceptance (redha), and gratitude for the results achieved. Philosophically, this concept encompasses four core dimensions: 1) avoiding greed in profit-seeking (traders feel satisfied with reasonable returns); 2) prioritising blessings over massive profits (blessed livelihood is far more vital than large but unethical profits); 3) maintaining social balance (by feeling content, traders avoid harming others or monopolising the market); and 4) achieving inner peace (contentment brings tranquillity to social and spiritual life). Furthermore, the real-world application of this ethical consciousness is concretely manifested in the field through:

1. Honesty and measurement transparency. In running a proper business, traders refrain from manipulating weights and scales, avoid hoarding commodities to engineer artificial scarcity for higher prices, and do not manipulate product quality.
2. Transactional empathy (social). Ethical traders are characterised by their willingness to offer flexible pricing in certain situations, provide leniency on business debts for those facing severe financial hardship, and voluntarily restrict profit margins to remain within reasonable limits.
3. Community-based goodwill. Traders are guided by the perception that buyers are not merely instruments for generating profit, but are vital social relations and brothers within the community bond.

The theoretical contribution of these findings directly refutes classical capitalism and formalist assumptions that market actors always behave egoistically to maximise profit. This economic behaviour ensures distributive justice at the local market level, minimises horizontal conflict, and preserves price stability through community-based moral control.

This finding aligns with the social typification described by Schutz (1932/1967), showing that the Malay method of business maintains harmonious interactions so customers feel comfortable shopping at their stores. This shows that economic relations are not separate from cultural and religious values. Furthermore, the embodied experience of the Malay community,

as understood through Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), appears in daily economic practices—such as greeting customers and negotiating without confrontation—alongside business strategies that prioritise stability over aggressive expansion. Therefore, the Malay community's economic behaviour shapes a citizenship model that highlights moral integrity, social order, and respect for collective values (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Nazirullah et al., 2023). Additionally, the Malay community shows that economic practices carry a powerful ethical dimension, particularly around harmony, respect, and social responsibility grounded in Islamic principles (Rahmanto et al., 2023; Selamat, 2025).

Productive ethos of the Chinese: Self-discipline, risk management and network solidarity

Ethnographic work on the retail networks and family businesses of the Chinese community in downtown Sekadau and the six district centres reveals an economic ethos centred on discipline, diligence, and meticulous risk mitigation. Economic actions operate as intentional activities oriented far into the future to ensure intergenerational business sustainability. However, a phenomenological reduction of the business actors' narratives reveals that this capital accumulation is not understood in individualistic or egoistic terms. Rather, it is driven by a desire to safeguard the family's and community's reputation. Economic success is viewed as a relational social obligation (*guanxi*) to fortify community resilience, which manifests through:

1. Providing internal business assistance without burdensome collateral to relatives who are just starting in business.
2. The active role of collective self-help bodies, such as the Bhakti Suci Foundation, in managing and funding public services, such as providing volunteer firefighting fleets and managing cemetery facilities.
3. The open distribution of market opportunity information and financial management strategies within the in-group circle.

Informants from this community, such as JL, VT, TH, and AC, described their economic experiences as shaped by a commercial ethos passed down through generations, where persistence, precision, and careful risk management are core elements. Phenomenological analysis shows that economic actions for the Chinese community are highly intentional, directed at expanding profits so their businesses can thrive. This aligns with Rea et al. (2019) and Sorenson and Milbrandt (2023), which explain that economic activity is understood as self-discipline, continuous effort, and pursuing success through hard work and strong family networks. In the view of de Graaff (2020) and Yew and Tan (2022), practices such as mutual assistance within internal networks, sharing business insights, and supporting community members launching new ventures demonstrate that the citizenship practised is relational and rooted in interdependence. This builds self-reliance, thereby reducing or even entirely avoiding reliance on local government aid. Consequently, the Chinese community's economic behaviour serves as a tool for building internal solidarity while contributing significantly to macroeconomic stability in Indonesia, particularly in West Kalimantan and Sekadau Regency.

Compared, these three communities show distinct economic behavioural patterns, yet all embody lived, contextualised citizenship. The Dayak community manifests a harmony-based communal citizenship, visible in their mutual agricultural cooperation. The Malay community expresses an ethical citizenship centred on honesty and social stability grounded in Islamic values. Meanwhile, the Chinese community showcases a productive citizenship driven by discipline and internal solidarity, honouring family bonds and trade associations like the Indonesian Chinese Entrepreneur Association (ICEA) and the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kadin). Nonetheless, all three operate within the same interactive space and continuously influence one another, making Sekadau an arena where various forms of culturally driven citizenship (cultural citizenship) meet the demands of local and modern economies. This interaction drives a dynamic process of negotiation, adaptation, and

reinterpretation of economic practices, where traditional values, ethnic identities, and civic norms are constantly reconfigured to ensure value-based local economic survival. In a phenomenological framework, these findings demonstrate that economic behaviour cannot be understood through a rigid separation of material and non-material aspects (Poitras, 2021). Economic experience is an experience of citizenship fused with the body, values, language, and the community's collective memory (Emiliussen et al., 2021). The phenomenological essence emerging from the field is that citizenship in Sekadau is not an abstract concept, but an active deed lived through daily work, interactions, and economic decisions. Thus, this study offers a fresh perspective that substantive citizenship practices can flourish from diverse local cultural foundations, contributing profoundly to the understanding of economic citizenship in multiethnic Indonesia.

Synthesis of the cultural citizenship typology: Research novelty

This study goes beyond merely describing comparative economic behaviours; it offers a theoretical novelty in the form of a Typology of Cultural Citizenship Based on Economic Behaviour. The three ethnic communities in Sekadau Regency operate within a single, interdependent economic interaction space, creating a hybrid arena where diverse value systems are dynamically negotiated. To clarify this description, Table 2 summarises the synthesis.

Table 2.
Typology of cultural citizenship based on economic behaviour

Ethnic Group	Cultural Dimension	Typology of Cultural Citizenship (Lived Citizenship)	Contribution to Stability & Economic Citizenship
Dayak Tribe	Customs, cooperation (gotong royong), togetherness, harmony with nature.	Communal Citizenship	Maintains social cohesion at the grassroots level and prevents social disintegration caused by free-market penetration.
Malay Tribe	Islamic law, honesty (trading with the heart), and contentment (feeling content).	Ethical Citizenship	Guarantees distributive justice in local markets, prevents monopolistic practices, and builds social order rooted in morality.
Chinese Tribe	Discipline, high work ethos, relational interdependence, and family business networks.	Productive Citizenship	Drives regional economic growth, provides employment opportunities, and establishes independent social safety net systems.

Source: Researchers (2026).

This comparative synthesis shows that daily economic behaviours—from managing household finances and saving to investing—are concrete forms of lived citizenship. In Sekadau's multiethnic social landscape, market rationality does not extinguish solidarity; rather, it coexists peacefully with local wisdom. These finding challenges reductionist economic approaches and broadens traditional economic citizenship theories that have long focused too

heavily on formal legal-political dimensions. It demonstrates that cultural plurality can be collectively configured as a robust foundation supporting the resilience of Indonesia's national economic system.

Conclusion

This study reinforces that economic behaviour among the Dayak, Malay, and Chinese tribes in Sekadau Regency serves as an active arena where civic values are lived, negotiated, and reinterpreted through daily interactions. By viewing these practices through an ethnographic-phenomenological lens focused on economic behaviour and subjective experience, the study shows that the activities of these three ethnic groups are inseparable from the horizon of their life-worlds (*Lebenswelt*). These life-worlds shape how they understand social relations, moral responsibilities, and orientations towards both their communities and the state.

For the Dayak tribe, economic behaviour is understood as an expression of co-existence that emphasises harmony and solidarity rooted in nature, God, and fellow humans, manifesting through customary traditions that birth communal citizenship. The Malay tribe promotes a model of ethical citizenship grounded in moral order, social stability, and respect for kinship and religious ties. Meanwhile, the Chinese tribe demonstrates that economic actions are anchored in self-discipline, perseverance, and interdependent networks that fortify community stability, cultivating productive citizenship. These three patterns show that substantive citizenship is not an abstract concept, but a practice rooted in each group's cultural values and lived experiences.

The findings highlight a long history of relatively stable trade relations among the Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities. This phenomenon forms the foundation for an inclusive and adaptive economic citizenship model. It illustrates that local economic spaces in Sekadau function as meeting points for diverse cultural citizenship modalities that stem from different traditions yet interact harmoniously within a normal order based on appreciation for cultural diversity.

Practically, these results highlight the importance of strengthening economic interaction spaces that enable cross-ethnic collaboration and open constructive dialogue between local values and modern development needs. Such reinforcement can form the foundation for designing culturally sensitive policies that support capacity building within a more substantive and participatory civic framework. By prioritising economic behaviour and subjective experiences as the analytical starting point, this study argues that sustaining collective life in a plural society requires a deep recognition of the diverse ways communities assign meaning to economics, community, and citizenship itself.

Authors' contributions

JR contributed to analysing the research problems and interpreting issues related to this study's topic. All authors maintained intensive communication in conceptualising and designing the research, executing the fieldwork, analysing the final results, and preparing the final manuscript. The research team collectively resolved every obstacle encountered before, during, and after field immersion, as well as throughout the writing process. Additionally, KK, RH, and AM provided specific guidance, verified methodologies, oversaw data processing, refined research results, and polished the academic language.

Competing interests

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Ethics Approval

This is an observational study. All informants participated voluntarily and free from any form of intimidation or discrimination by the research team.

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