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## The Dayaks' Food Taboos: Their Meanings and Functions for the Tariu Borneo Bangkule Rajakng Members

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### Abstract

*Studies on food taboos are mainly discussed within the context of pregnancy. There is less focus on the relationship between practices and ethnic groups. TBBR, as one of the Dayak organizations, requires its members to perform food taboos. These are believed to be a vital part of Dayak culture and spirituality, inherited through generations, serving as a code of conduct, a protector of spiritual harmony, and a marker of cultural identity. This ethnographic study aims to identify food taboo practices, their contributing factors, and their impact on members of the Tariu Borneo Bangkule Rajakng (TBBR) Organization. The analysis reveals that food taboos within TBBR are not only related to physical health but also serve as spiritual rituals to gain strength and immunity and to connect present-day people with their ancestors. In addition, these taboos reinforce discipline, promote solidarity, and affirm the Dayak cultural identity. In conclusion, the practice of food taboos in TBBR is a complex tradition that integrates spiritual, physical, and social aspects, aiming to preserve the ancestral cultural heritage in the modern era.*

**Keywords:** *ancestral practices, cultural identity, Dayak, food taboos*

### Introduction

Food taboos have long been an integral part of the cultural life of many communities, rooted in customary values, collective beliefs, and local wisdom passed down through generations (Molina et al., 2024). In many societies, food is not merely a biological necessity but also a cultural medium through which moral values, spiritual relationships, social boundaries, and collective identities are expressed. Sanung et al. (2022) argue that food taboos function as life rules that regulate community members' behavior, ensuring alignment with social norms, spirituality, and the environment. Therefore, food taboos should not be seen only as restrictions on consumption, but also as symbolic systems that reveal how communities organize their world, classify purity and danger, and maintain social and spiritual order.

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Studies on food taboos have been widely conducted in various regional contexts, including Africa (Abere, 2023; Adom-Opore, 2022), South Asia (Chakrabarti & Chakrabarti, 2019), Southeast Asia (Abdullah, 2022; Angkasa et al., 2024; Headey, 2025; Putri et al., 2020), North and South America (Bassan, 2020), Europe (Szlachciuk & Żakowska-Biemans, 2024), and the Pacific (Henrich, 2010). These studies show that food taboos are often associated with health issues (Abdullah, 2022; Labonté, 2023; Owusu-Darko, 2024), pregnancy and maternity (Abere, 2023; Lestari & Muchtar, 2022), and cultural beliefs (Acire et al., 2023; Bala, 2021). Such studies are important because they demonstrate that food taboos are not isolated practices, but are embedded in wider cultural, ecological, medical, and religious systems. However, much of the existing literature still tends to emphasize either the health consequences of food taboos or their symbolic meanings within traditional community settings.

In Indonesia, studies on food taboos have generally focused on pregnancy, maternity, and postpartum practices. Putri et al. (2020, p. 222), Molina et al. (2024, p. 32), and Angkasa et al. (2024, p. 20) argue that although some communities believe food taboos can protect the health of the mother and fetus, these practices may also produce health-related problems, such as malnutrition and chronic energy deficiency during pregnancy. This indicates that food taboos in Indonesia are frequently discussed in the context of the tension between cultural beliefs and biomedical concerns. Such an approach is useful, yet it does not fully explain how food taboos may also operate as mechanisms of social discipline, moral commitment, organizational belonging, and cultural identity in contemporary ethnic groups.

For example, in the specific case of the Dayak Meratus group in South Kalimantan, Ilawati and Sofiyanti (2022) explain that postpartum mothers are prohibited from consuming foods with a fishy smell, such as chicken meat and eggs, as well as sweet, spicy, sour, itchy, and oily foods. These foods are believed to cause negative effects, including slippery reproductive organs, bleeding, fever, and physical weakness. Similar beliefs are also found among the Kaili group in Palu, Central Sulawesi, where certain foods are considered capable of producing negative effects during pregnancy, including mystical consequences and nutritional limitations; therefore, food taboos during pregnancy are regarded as essential (Jayadi et al., 2020). These examples show that food taboos are often connected to ideas about bodily vulnerability, spiritual danger, and social protection.

Additionally, several factors contribute to the persistence of food taboo practices among pregnant women in Indonesia. Previous studies suggest that limited access to information or education, customary rules transmitted across generations, and economic limitations within the nuclear family have contributed to these practices (Putri et al., 2020, p. 228). Furthermore, Triratnawati (2019, p. 85) reveals that pregnant women may become marginalised and discriminated against because food taboo rules are often shaped by power relations involving authoritative actors, such as husbands, mothers, and mothers-in-law. This suggests that food taboos are not only related to belief and health, but also to authority, control, and social hierarchy.

Other studies have examined how food taboos represent ethnic values within Indonesia's culturally diverse communities. Sanung et al. (2022), for example, examine food taboos among women of the Waling group in East Manggarai, who are prohibited from consuming foods considered offerings (*sesajen*) to their ancestors. Laksono and Wulandari (2021) show that among the Mayu group in Papua, individuals are believed to lose their magical power, known as *waruk*, if they violate food taboos by consuming sembilang fish, blue shrimp, cuscus, or snakes. These studies are useful for understanding how food prohibitions are associated with ancestral relations, sacred power, and ethnic identity. Nevertheless, there remains a need to examine how food taboos are maintained in contemporary organizational settings, especially where ethnic identity, spiritual discipline, and modern social life intersect.

A similar relationship between food taboos and belief in spiritual or magical power can be observed in Dayak traditions in West Kalimantan. West Kalimantan is a province on the island of Borneo, which is inhabited by three nation-states: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. Scholars tend to refer to Indonesian Borneo as Kalimantan (also known as Kalimantan on the Indonesian side), and it is inhabited by several ethnic groups, including Dayaks, Malays, and Chinese. The Dayaks are widely recognised as one of the indigenous groups of the region and share cultural similarities and familial ties with Dayak communities in Malaysian Sarawak and Sabah (Dewantara et al., 2025, 2026). For Dayak communities in West Kalimantan, food is viewed not only as physical nourishment but also as a cultural and spiritual symbol. Certain foods may be associated with purity, danger, strength, ancestral protection, or spiritual vulnerability. Thus, rules concerning food consumption are closely related to how Dayak communities understand the body, the self, the ancestors, and the moral boundaries of collective life.

Food taboos in West Kalimantan are also preserved within Tariu Borneo Bangkule Rajakng (TBBR), one of the Dayak organisations there. TBBR was formed in response to the heated social situation in 2017, especially amid tensions with the FPI organisation ahead of the Dayak Gawai Week and originated from the organisation *Pasukan Merah* Samabue or Binua Samaya from Mempawah, approximately 76 km from West Kalimantan's capital city, Pontianak. Initially, TBBR had around 70 members and rapidly expanded from the Pontianak, Ambawang, and Mempawah areas to various regions in West Kalimantan, even reaching Sarawak, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. This organisation was established and formally registered as an organisation in 2017, with the purpose of uniting Dayak people and preserving their customs and culture (Irpan et al., 2024). TBBR was established is important in discussions of contemporary Dayak society because it is not merely a cultural association but also an organisation with a wide membership network across Kalimantan, Sarawak in Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. Nicolas (2023) notes that TBBR has more than 370,000 transnational members. The organisation has also become visible in the Indonesian political landscape, particularly through its support for Prabowo Subianto during the regional campaign in West Kalimantan, who was subsequently elected President of Indonesia (Kiswantoro, 2024). This shows that TBBR represents a contemporary form of

Dayak collective organisation in which culture, identity, solidarity, spirituality, and political visibility are interrelated.

Within TBBR, food taboos provide an important entry point for understanding how ancestral values are maintained in modern times. Based on preliminary interviews, TBBR members are prohibited from consuming certain types of animal meat, including beef, buffalo, snake, and dog. The organisation also forbids the consumption of narcotics and alcoholic drinks in order to maintain physical and spiritual purity, strengthen discipline, and reinforce collective awareness among members. According to Irpan et al. (2024), one perceived benefit for members who observe food taboos is the acquisition or maintenance of magical power, such as immunity, which is believed to be granted by God and the spirits of Dayak ancestors. These rules indicate that food taboos are not only inherited cultural prohibitions but also moral and spiritual commitments that shape members' behaviour.

In contemporary practice, however, the observance of food taboos among TBBR members should be understood as a living, negotiated process rather than a static tradition. Modern social life exposes members to changing food habits, mobility across regions, urban lifestyles, diverse religious and social backgrounds, and the availability of modern consumer products, including alcohol and narcotics. In this context, the persistence of food taboos raises important questions about how far these rules are actually observed, how members understand their obligations, and how the organisation encourages compliance. Preliminary findings indicate that food taboos remain valued as signs of discipline, spiritual protection, and loyalty to ancestral teachings. At the same time, the extent of observance may vary depending on members' age, position within the organisation, ritual experience, personal commitment, and closeness to organisational leaders. Therefore, the current practice of food taboos within TBBR is central to understanding their meanings and functions in contemporary Dayak life.

This study is theoretically informed by Mary Douglas's concept of purity and danger, as revisited by Ditlevsen and Andersen (2021). Douglas (2002) argues that "dirt" is not merely physical filth, but something considered "out of place," functioning as a symbolic marker that distinguishes the sacred from the profane within a social system. In this sense, taboo does not simply prohibit certain objects or behaviours; it creates order by defining what is appropriate, pure, dangerous, or socially unacceptable. Ditlevsen and Andersen (2021) further expand this discussion by exploring the contemporary meanings of "pure" and "dirt," including the preference for industrialised products over natural-based products and the role of individual consciousness in distinguishing between purity and impurity. Their conceptualisation is relevant to understanding how modernity shapes how communities classify food, substances, bodies, and moral conduct.

In the context of TBBR, Douglas's concept helps explain how food taboos regulate symbolic boundaries between what is considered sacred and profane, pure and impure, permitted and prohibited. The prohibition against consuming certain types of animal meat, narcotics, and alcoholic drinks reflects not only dietary restriction but also a broader system of bodily discipline, spiritual protection, and collective identity. Meanwhile, Ditlevsen and Andersen's contemporary reading of purity and dirt helps explain how modern substances

and lifestyles are incorporated into the moral vocabulary of taboo. Thus, the study of food taboos among TBBR members offers insight into how ancestral rules are preserved, reinterpreted, and negotiated in a modern organisational context.

Therefore, this paper contributes to the literature on food taboos, ethnic identity, and contemporary Dayak society in Indonesia. It addresses a gap in previous studies that have primarily discussed food taboos in relation to pregnancy, maternity, health, and traditional belief systems, while paying less attention to how food taboos operate within ethnic organisations as mechanisms of discipline, solidarity, power relations, and identity formation. This paper aims to understand how Dayak food taboos in West Kalimantan reveal the relationships among cultural values, health issues, spiritual beliefs, organisational authority, and modernity. More specifically, it examines how the current observance of food taboos among TBBR members shapes their cultural identity, reinforces solidarity, and reflects power relations within the organisation.

This study is guided by the following research questions: How are food taboos currently understood and observed by TBBR members in modern times? How do social relations between members and the TBBR organisation influence the preservation of ancestral food taboo rules? How do food taboos strengthen cultural identity and solidarity among TBBR members? To what extent do power relations within the organisation operate through the practice and enforcement of food taboos? By addressing these questions, this paper seeks to show that food taboos are not merely remnants of traditional belief but active cultural practices through which contemporary Dayak communities negotiate purity, discipline, identity, and belonging.

This paper is divided into several sections. The introduction has identified the research background, reviewed previous studies on food taboos, and outlined the urgency of examining food taboos within TBBR as a contemporary Dayak organisation in West Kalimantan. The following section explains the ethnographic research method used to collect and analyse the data. The discussion section is divided into three subsections: the factors that influence food taboo practices within TBBR; the types of prohibited foods and substances, along with their health impacts and philosophical meanings; and the role of the TBBR organisation in maintaining cultural identity and solidarity among members through food taboo rules. Finally, this paper presents the conclusion and suggestions for further research.

## **Research Method**

This research employed a qualitative paradigm with an ethnographic approach to examine the meanings and cultural practices of food taboos within the Tariu Borneo Bangkule Rajakng (TBBR) community. Its objective is to investigate food taboo practices in this social context. Following Kuleva (2023), this study applied ethnography through direct engagement with the research site, interviews, and observations to understand the agency of the actors involved. The primary focus of the research is on food taboos, including the types of food avoided, the reasons for avoidance, and their role in shaping Dayak spirituality, health, and solidarity. The research not only documents food taboos but also

explores their underlying symbolic meanings, values, and spiritual reasons. Food taboos are understood not only as prohibitions but also as integral to Dayak cultural identity, bonds of solidarity, and ancestral heritage that must be preserved.

This field research was conducted over seven to eight months from 2024 to 2025, considered sufficient to complete all stages, from planning to the final report. The research location was in the TBBR area of Pontianak City, specifically in Siantan Hulu Village, North Pontianak. This location was carefully selected to enable researchers to interact directly with community members and observe their cultural practices in their natural setting.

The study employed three primary data collection methods. First, participatory observation, in which researchers actively engaged with community members' daily routines to gain contextual insights into food taboos and the social interactions that accompany them. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants to explore their perspectives, experiences, and the symbolic meanings they associate with food taboos. The research participants are four TBBR members and elites who actively observe food taboos (details of the informants are available in Table 1; names have been pseudonymised in this text for ethical reasons). The selection criteria aim to gain insiders' insight into how members of TBBR perceive and give meaning to food taboo practices. These informants were selected because they represent different positions within TBBR, including organisational leadership, customary authority, and ordinary membership, thereby allowing the study to capture variations in how food taboos are understood, maintained, and practised within the organisation. Thus, interviewing non-members is irrelevant in this context. The tools used included voice recorders and field notebooks. Interviews were conducted in the local Dayak Kanayath language; therefore, the English translations are the author's responsibility. Third, documentation was utilised to complement the data through relevant archives, photographs, and written notes, thereby supporting the ethnographic findings.

**Table 1 List of Informants**

No	<i>Psuedo Name</i>	Age	Occupation	Structure in TBBR
1	<i>Anmang</i>	34 y.o	Teacher	Secretary General
2	<i>Ikatan</i>	47 y.o	Artist	Mangku (Leader) at Pontianak Branch Organisation
3	<i>Garanda</i>	25 y.o	Private Employee	Customary Leader
4	<i>Nampah</i>	22 y.o	Private Employee	Member

Source: Author, 2025

Data analysis was conducted by integrating the empirical material gathered from interviews and observations. As Kuleva (2023, p. 19) suggests, the ethnographic analysis should examine how the interlocutors' narratives and practices within the research site's physical space shape their identities. Thus, researchers interpreted the symbolic patterns that emerge from the narratives and practices as a whole, based on data from observations, interviews, and documentation. The analysis was carried out by comparing recurring themes across interview narratives, observational notes, and documentation, particularly those related to prohibition, purity, discipline, ancestral belief, identity, and solidarity. All

analysis results were presented as qualitative descriptive narratives that reflected the cultural understanding of the TBBR members regarding food taboos and were further examined through Douglas's theory of pure and dirt.

## **Results and Discussion**

The eating culture of TBBR members is deeply rooted in the values and traditions of the Dayak community, blending local wisdom into their daily food consumption. The food commonly consumed is made from natural ingredients, such as vegetables, freshwater fish, and meat from hunted animals like pigs and chickens. The food is served using special local spices that create a unique flavour. Additionally, communal meals during rituals and celebrations, such as Gawai Dayak, a Dayak harvest thanksgiving ritual and cultural celebration, are essential moments that strengthen brotherhood and social bonds among TBBR members. During these events, food is provided in abundance and shared equally as a symbol of unity and togetherness.

Similarly, food taboos in TBBR are rooted in customary traditions and rituals that form the primary foundation for sustaining the organisation. In TBBR, these practices are not merely physical prohibitions but also carry profound spiritual significance. They serve as a sincere expression of respect for their ancestors, maintaining the purity and honour of each community member, thereby helping preserve a harmonious balance among humans, nature, and the spiritual world. The following sections will explain the factors that stimulate food taboo practices within members of TBBR, the types of food prohibitions and their impact on health and philosophical meanings, and the role of TBBR in enforcing food taboos among its members.

### **Balancing the spirituality, moral values of food taboos, and a healthy diet among TBBR members**

One of the food taboos practiced among TBBR members is Mutih, a fasting practice associated with bodily and spiritual purification. *Mutih* is a fasting ritual that involves consuming only white rice, salt, and plain water without any other food during a certain period, typically observed every Monday and Thursday from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM a fasting practice associated with bodily and spiritual purification. *Mutih* is performed as a form of physical and spiritual purification, believed to harmonise the relationship between humans and their ancestors. Anmang, one of the elites who served as the secretary general of the organisation, described:

*"Mutih* is usually performed ahead of important ceremonial events like the *Gawai Padi* (*Gawai Padi* refers to an annual festival in Dayak group during rice harvest thanksgiving ritual that expresses gratitude for agricultural abundance and ancestral protection. Commonly celebrate from Mei to June. In Sarawak (Malaysia), *Hari Gawai* is celebrated as a state's public holiday) festival and the anniversary of Keramat Patih Patinggi (*Keramat Patih Patinggi* refers to a sacred ancestral reference respected in local Dayak ritual memory and practice. He was a sacred person in the belief of TBBR members who lived during the ancient Dayak kingdom in Mempawah region). This

is aimed at ensuring the event runs smoothly and avoiding negative disruptions. Mutih has a symbolic function akin to caring for a house to keep it clean and calm, so that the desired positive energy can enter and create a harmonious atmosphere throughout the event" [Interview, 12 January 2025].

He highlights the spiritual aim of *Mutih*, which is used as a means of prayer and request to achieve a person's good intentions, such as the smooth completion of a thesis or the success of a business. Additionally, he also emphasises the function of the practice ahead of important ceremonial events. The locals believe that *Mutih* contributed to the smooth running of the event and helped prevent disturbances.

Besides *Mutih*, *Pantang Minyak*, literally meaning "abstinence from oil," is another form of food-fasting practice that excludes foods containing oil or fat. As explained by the Mangku, a customary leader within the TBBR structure in Pontianak:

"There is also *Puasa Minyak*, where we can't eat using cooking oil, we can't eat boiled fish because the fish is fatty, so if you cook it, there will be oil coming out, it's not allowed to mix cooked vegetables with anchovies, so we just eat boiled green vegetables. This fasting depends on your intention for how long, usually seven days" [Interview, 3 February 2025].

He reveals that foods such as fish cooked by boiling (because it releases natural oils), vegetables cooked with anchovies and fried or oil-spiced foods are not consumed during *Pantang Minyak*, although in the interview our interlocutor uses the term *Puasa Minyak*, but in other interviews he and other interlocutors sometimes use the term *Pantang Minyak* substitutively. *Pantang Minyak* is not merely about abstaining from oily foods, but a discipline that demands spiritual awareness and self-control over worldly desires attached to oily foods for a specific period of days. The statement also shows how the practice of *Pantang Minyak* serves as training for members to control themselves in the face of worldly temptations.

Not only meat, but several types of vegetables are also prohibited. A customary leader explained the prohibition of some vegetables:

"There are also types of vegetables like ferns and bamboo shoots that are both forbidden because of their cold nature, so we avoid them so that our hearts are not like ferns that do not care about the suffering of others. Pumpkins are climbing plants, and all climbing plants are forbidden to eat. The philosophy is that it fears the mouth that eats pumpkin will become like cursing, speaking dirty, and having uncontrolled emotions. These include drugs, alcoholic drinks, snake, beef, goat, *kundur* (gourd), fern, bamboo shoots, and pumpkin. Usually, people who have just given birth use chayote as protection from *kuntilanak* (*Kuntilanak* refers to a female spirit in Indonesian and Malay supernatural belief, often associated with childbirth, danger, and disturbance. A detailed explanation on the narrative of *Kuntilanak* in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, see Duile (2020)), so this fruit should not be eaten carelessly" [Interview, 12 January 2025].

The practices reveal the spiritual impact of food on people and the spiritual use of certain foods (or vegetables) in their daily lives. Anmang's emphasis on the characteristics of vegetables and their beliefs about the vegetables' spiritual impact on humans. Besides, because some vegetables have a magical effect, such as *kundur* (gourd), which he said helps expel *kuntilanak*, people consume them only in limited amounts. Studies show that women in the Waling group in East Manggarai are prohibited from consuming certain foods because doing so has spiritual implications for the body (Sanung et al., 2022). Others reveal that consuming *sembilang* fish, blue shrimp, cuscus, and snakes also has magical effects; for example, in the Mayu group, it causes them to lose their magical power (Laksono & Wulandari, 2021). Additionally, the interlocutors strongly believe that there is a connection between spiritual meaning and the health issues associated with their food taboos and practices. For example, Anmang said:

“Actually, our diet itself hasn't had much of an impact, but we personally feel that our diet is more controlled and focused. For example, if they are used to eating beef in various forms, such as meatballs, they are not allowed to consume beef by joining the TBBR organisation. If you think clearly, cows have quite high cholesterol levels. We can see from other views, such as in Bali or India, which Hinduism influences, that they consider cows to be sacred animals. However, there is also the view that eating beef is bad luck, so from that perspective, if we eat it, we will be unlucky” [Interview, 12 January 2025].

His explanation reveals that food taboo consciously guides TBBR members toward healthier, more structured eating, encouraging the consumption of natural, nutritious foods such as vegetables and plant-based proteins. The members of TBBR combine their belief about the cow with modern medical knowledge about the composition of fat after cooking. For him, the fat in beef reduces the risk of chronic diseases and supports mental well-being through a sense of control and spiritual satisfaction. This culturally maintained dietary pattern helps members become more disciplined and responsible in their food choices. It indicates the integration of consuming natural-based food with the idea of preserving ancestral values and traditions. The practices reveal how the contemporary concepts of “pure” and “dirt,” as suggested by Ditlevsen and Andersen (2021), are enacted in indigenous food taboos.

Furthermore, the way he linked the issue of cows to other religions' perspectives reflects the community's worldview regarding religion and dietary practices. Not only does this demonstrate how the locals understood the spiritual significance of food and religious practices, but it also shows that they developed a belief that eating cows is associated with bad omens. This understanding is closely related to the Hindu belief that cows are highly respected animals. Studies also show a connection between the Dayak people's religions and Hinduism. Historically, the Dayaks in West Kalimantan were influenced by Hinduism before encountering Islam and Christianity (Halim et al., 2021; Haridison et al., 2024).

One of the main factors motivating the observance of food taboos is the preservation of ancestral practices, reconnection with ancestors, and strengthening of the group's values. According to Ikatan, an elite of TBBR:

“These food taboos are closely related to customs and ancestors. While we're here to observe taboos, they're certainly mandatory, but not strictly enforced. Our primary focus is on enhancing members' attitudes. Members are obligated to maintain their attitudes and correct their negative behaviour, discarding the negative and embracing the positive” (Interview, 3 February 2025).

For him, the practice symbolises his utmost belief in the harmonious connection between humans and their ancestors through physical and spiritual purification. He also describes, “These are the main taboos, according to our ancestors. The main taboos are alcohol, dogs, cows, snakes, and goats. Drinking alcohol as a medicine is good, as long as it's not consumed excessively.” [Interview, 3 February 2025] The locals adhere to the food taboo to honour their ancestors and replicate what they practised regarding their dietary cultures. Septiana et al. (2024) reflects on the connection between the living and their ancestors through ritual performance that uses sacred and magical languages. As also argued by Kišjuhas (2024), rituals involve emotional attachment and have a political goal of mobilising members of the group who share conflicting interests to meet one another and construct social ties. In this context, the TBBR members pay respect to the way of life their ancestors taught them over generations, while simultaneously reproducing their connections to one another as part of their group identity.

The analysis shows that these food taboos serve as an effective tool for strengthening the Dayak cultural identity. Others explain that performing rituals, obeying *adat*, calling on ancestral spirits, and their relations with supernatural beings are among the ways the Dayak in West Kalimantan identify themselves as a group that differs from other ethnic groups in the region (Niko et al., 2026). By preserving customs and traditions passed down from ancestors, members of TBBR are continually reminded of the importance of safeguarding their cultural heritage, which characterises and empowers their group. Thus, these food taboos serve to build strong morals and reinforce social solidarity among members.

The analysis also reveals how the food taboos represent group solidarity among TBBR members. Ikatan, the TBBR's elite, explained:

“That's why TBBR members used to be like us, drinkers before joining. But not drunkards because we still knew our limits. Many TBBR members lived lives that could be considered criminal, so out of the 400,000 people who were ex-convicts, Jakarta, Sarawak, and Brunei, we are very grateful for TBBR's existence in the struggle to guide the Dayak people on a good path” [Interview, 3 February 2025].

He emphasises that food taboos in TBBR are not just rules to follow but also represent a value system that teaches members about self-control. Anmang, as the secretary general of the organisation, argues, “*Pantang* or abstinence is a term that is formed as a provision

that cannot be violated and becomes a rule that will be formed in a group.” [Interview, 12 January 2025] The practices serve as instruments for moral formation and the development of members' attitudes by adhering to the group's rules, particularly food taboos.

From the interviews and observations, the members of TBBR understand food taboos as both a form of respect for customs and ancestors and a means of maintaining cultural identity amid the influence of modern consumerist culture. By practising food taboos, they spiritually cleanse themselves and affirm their commitment to the traditional values inherited, while also resisting the waves of modernisation that could erode local wisdom.

Additionally, food taboos have a spiritual dimension, as they are believed to maintain physical health and the spiritual well-being of members and the community, thus becoming an essential part of their spiritual life. Food taboos are not merely prohibitions on consuming certain foods; they are also symbols of discipline and self-control, helping to avoid a lifestyle of instant gratification and excess. The practice is believed to be related to the magical and spiritual powers they possess.

Moreover, in the TBBR, various types of food and drinks are prohibited as important rules to maintain spiritual balance, physical health, and respect for the ancestors of the Dayak community. These foods, for example, drugs, alcoholic drinks, snake, beef, goat, gourd, fern, bamboo shoots, and pumpkin. Food taboos not only restrict consumption but also help maintain the purity of the mind and body, thereby avoiding negative influences from the spiritual world. According to Garanda, drugs and alcoholic beverages are forbidden by the TBBR. He further said:

“We believe that drugs impair awareness and clarity of thought, which are vital for connecting with the spiritual realm and ancestors. Using drugs may make us susceptible to the influence of evil spirits and disturb our internal energy balance. Alcohol, like drugs, can be harmful to ourselves and future generations. We hope that the Dayak community will avoid harming themselves through alcohol consumption” (Interview, 12 January 2025).

The case of drugs and alcoholic drinks is considered polluted because they can disturb the purity of the mind, body, and relationship with ancestors. At the same time, permitted foods maintain the harmony of the body, mind, and spirit. The interlocutor believes that drugs and alcoholic drinks can damage consciousness and the clarity of the mind. Not only harming the physical aspects, but the members also argue about the possible influence of evil spirits and negative energy from consuming drugs and alcoholic drinks. For him, a clear mind, consciousness, and purity are essential for connecting with ancestors and the spiritual realm. Building upon the conceptualisation of “pure” and “dirt” by Douglas (2002) The locals perceive the TBBR's food-taboo regulations as a means of distinguishing what can and cannot be consumed, thereby maintaining social and spiritual order. These taboos also serve as health rules and as markers of cultural identity, strengthening the solidarity of the Dayak community.

Thus, the food taboo aims to enhance the members' obedience and self-control, thereby representing organisational dignity. Anmang, one of the elites, serves as the

secretary general of the organisation, supports *Ikatan's* argument on members' obligation by saying:

"In TBBR, the existence of food taboos also reminds us of our elders in the past who did not eat anything. Some of these taboos are intended to shape the younger generation of Dayaks into better people and prevent them from falling into negative habits. For example, in TBBR, there are taboos on consuming alcohol, drugs, and free sex, which are strict taboos that must not be done because they can damage the Dayak generation. These taboos also train individuals to control themselves from luxury. These food taboos exist with the aim of shaping members to become better" (Interview, 12 January 2025).

He reveals the food taboo as a means for members to practice their organisational values and protect the youth from moral decline caused by modernisation, such as alcohol and drug abuse, and free sex. The practice illustrates how members are trained to protect themselves from external influences considered destructive to the younger generation of the Dayak community. In the context of the younger generation in the era of modernisation, Ditlevsen and Andersen (2021) have shown that the preference is to return to nature-based products rather than consume industrialised products such as alcoholic beverages or narcotics.

The interlocutor indicates that food taboos within the TBBR organisation serve an essential and dual function. In addition to maintaining the physical health of its members, these prohibitions also help preserve their mental health by intentionally avoiding foods considered risky not only physically but also spiritually and socially. Others support the idea that practising dietary restrictions on certain foods contributes to better health (Labonté, 2023; Owusu-Darko, 2024). Thus, food taboos in TBBR are not merely physical obligations; they also help shape strong, disciplined individuals who adhere firmly to customary values and spirituality. They promote essential values such as self-control in facing worldly temptations and foster deep respect not only for fellow community members but also for God and ancestors, who are believed to offer protection and spiritual strength.

Furthermore, several types of meat are also considered taboo and have been so for generations. Garanda explained, "In TBBR itself, we have several types of things that are prohibited, namely drugs and alcohol, beef, goat, snake, bamboo shoots, ferns, *kundur* (gourd), pumpkin and eggs" [Interview, 12 January 2025]. He further explained the philosophical meaning of the prohibition of those meats:

"Snakes are often considered to have magical powers, even linked to the underworld. Eating snake meat can disrupt our energy and lead to spiritual illness. Especially if someone is descended from a snake, they are forbidden to eat snake meat out of respect for their ancestors. Cows and goats are similarly forbidden, as they are said to prevent us from smelling like enemies. Our ancestors never ate beef either, so we respect that tradition" [Interview, 12 January 2025].

Members of TBBR, in addition to considering the spiritual impact of such foods on the soul, also honor these generational practices and their ancestors. Others argue that traditions and ancestor reverence are well preserved in the Dayak community in both Indonesia and Malaysia (Dewantara et al., 2025; Duile, 2023). In some rituals, they tend to call on their ancestor spirit or offer something to it in a sacred language distinct from everyday language (Septiana et al., 2024). Septiana et al. (2024) further highlight the importance of communication between the dead and the living as the driving force behind the preservation of tradition. Thus, for the Dayaks, their connection with the ancestors is unbreakable.

As previously argued, the TBBR's members deeply respect their ancestors and their practices regarding the food taboo. Anmang recalled that memory and how the elders taught them about a healthy lifestyle through a healthy diet:

“All the prohibitions we follow are also linked to health, so we don't eat carelessly, and remember that our ancestors did not eat recklessly. Basically, the rules we enforce create a force whenever they are broken, whether on purpose or not. But we don't take it lightly, because usually when we break them, our bodies feel uncomfortable, sometimes hot, and also restless and unsettled. It feels like there's a warning from within that makes us realise how important these rules are. So, these prohibitions are not just ordinary rules but also serve to maintain our physical and mental balance. Therefore, we are always reminded to be cautious and to respect the rules handed down from our ancestors so that our lives stay healthy and harmonious” (Interview, 12 January 2025).

He repeatedly argues about the importance of remembering their elders and ancestral dietary practices. For him, food taboos symbolise respect for elders and ancestors. As in the previous explanation of how these habits develop and are preserved through their elders' and ancestors' practices, violations are also remembered as lessons taught by those elders and ancestors. For the locals, taboos are rules, and they fear violating them because of the consequences. His understanding of food taboos, violations, and their repercussions indicates that the members of TBBR see balancing rules and awareness of a healthy lifestyle, physically, mentally, and spiritually, as essential. It also demonstrates the preservation of the group's values and culture by passing these rules down to future generations. Studies show that this particular practice of passing knowledge down through generations is also observed within the Dayak Kanayath community through oral literature (Syam et al., 2024). This is also relevant to this research because observations and interviews reveal that TBBR relies on oral literature to educate its members about the group's history and rules, including food taboos, practices, and rituals.

Although several types of food are prohibited and rules impose sanctions for breaking them, the group offers special treatment to members to atone for their sins or violations. The person who violates the taboo should perform a special ritual called *Basasah*, a purification ritual intended to cleanse and restore the person after breaking customary prohibitions. From informal conversations, locals explained that *Basasah*, as

shown in figure 1, also involves a purification ritual to cleanse the member's soul and to respect nature and the ancestors' spirits. Anmang explained the redemption process and the significance of purification:

“When it comes to breaking taboos in TBBR, we have a mechanism called *Basasah*, which uses several ingredients such as water, seven types of flowers, and young betel nuts. This ritual is a kind of traditional ceremony to address and correct any violations. However, this doesn't mean people can break them at will. After all, every violation has consequences. For example, if someone drinks alcohol, according to the traditional oath, they will usually feel dizzy or unsteady, a kind of natural sanction. Of course, this traditional oath really comes down to individual beliefs; some believe strongly, while others are a bit sceptical” (Interview, 12 January 2025).

**Figure 1 A plate Consists of the Substances Needed for the *Basasah* Ritual**



Source: Author's collection, 2025

He believed that *Basasah* could not be interpreted as meaning that the members were neglecting the rules on food taboos. Every action must have consequences, and in this context, there will be direct sanctions from God, such as dizziness or staggering after drinking alcohol. Anmang believes these direct impacts should be seen as warnings from their local belief system, the divine being they worship, and as reminders to others to continue respecting customary rules for the sake of balance and social harmony. The members also show that the belief varies with how much people trust these rules. It demonstrates how traditional values and the ancient religions of a particular ethnic group are questioned as members encounter modernity, sometimes in ways that conflict with the group's spiritual experiences.

In relation to Douglas' theorisation of “pure”, the rituals can be interpreted as a mechanism for educating members about the difference between being “good” and “evil”. However, as explained earlier, this understanding depends on the member's rationality about the belief. The influence of religious missionaries on ethnic groups in Indonesia demonstrates how “old” and “new” religions have encountered, influenced, and opposed one another over time (Halim et al., 2021; Haridison et al., 2024). It highlights the challenge of preserving ancestral beliefs (or religions) in modern eras; for instance, as Sada et al. (2019, pp. 9–10) argue, globalisation and global values have posed challenges to the preservation of the Dayak's collective identity.

### **TBBR Organisational Role: Its Power Relations and Enhancing Solidarity Among Members**

TBBR, as one of the largest Dayak customary community organisations in Kalimantan, plays a strategic and fundamental role in strengthening, preserving, and passing down the Dayak people's cultural identity from generation to generation. The name *Tariu Borneo Bangkule Rajakng* holds profound meaning and is embedded in Dayak historical memory and cultural values. According to the interlocutors, the word "Tariu" in the name means "to proclaim" or "to cheer". The word "Borneo" refers directly to the island of Kalimantan, which is the geographical context and the primary identity the organisation wants to highlight. Additionally, the part of the name "*Bangkule Rajakng*" is derived from the name of a Dayak kingdom located in Toho District, which symbolises the historical heritage, local wisdom, pride, and cultural values that the organisation seeks to protect and preserve in all its activities and goals. Thus, the philosophy of the name *Tariu Borneo Bangkule Rajakng* reflects the spirit, identity, and strong cultural roots of the Dayak people in Kalimantan.

Initially, TBBR was established to strengthen and build a civilised, faithful, knowledgeable, and responsible Dayak community in social and national life. Garanda said:

"So, TBBR's main goal is to safeguard and preserve our Dayak collective identity. We want our ancestral customs, traditions, and culture to remain alive and become the daily foundation of the Dayak people. This allows young people to learn about and continue this cultural heritage. Furthermore, TBBR also wants to unite all Dayak people, regardless of religion, sub-tribe, or region. We want these customs and culture to become a strong foundation for making Dayak communities throughout Borneo more united, advanced, and dignified" [Interview, 12 January 2025].

Garanda emphasises that TBBR serves as the frontline defender, safeguarding the Dayak community from arbitrary actions or threats that could harm them. Regarding preservation, TBBR is dedicated to protecting and maintaining the distinct customs, culture, and traditions of the Dayak, such as the *Babore* ceremony, a Dayak healing or ritual practice, and the *Nyangahatn* ritual (*Nyangahatn*, a ritual prayer or offering addressed to ancestral and spiritual forces), a prayer or offering ritual addressed to ancestral and spiritual forces, and various other traditions that are the identity and ancestral heritage of the Dayak people. The analysis revealed that TBBR serves as a unifying platform that comprehensively preserves and strengthens the Dayak people's culture and identity, without distinguishing among subgroups.

One of the important values upheld by TBBR is the recognition and respect for the diversity of Dayak sub-ethnic groups. Currently, TBBR has successfully gathered around 405 Dayak tribes, uniting them under one organisation. This organisation also serves as a unifying forum for Dayak people from diverse religious, sub-ethnic, and regional backgrounds, making customs and culture the primary foundation for building solidarity and collective identity. TBBR also expands its network across borders into Sarawak, Malaysia, by uniting the Dayak groups through various socio-cultural activities, such as

traditional dances and customary ceremonies. Although this organisation is rooted in the Dayak Ahe Kanayatn-Karimawatan sub-ethnic tradition in West Kalimantan. Instead, they allow members to deliberately follow the customs and traditions of their respective sub-ethnic groups, such as the Iban, Kenyah, Ngaju, and others. This inclusive approach aims to prevent the dominance of one sub-ethnic culture over another, avoiding potential conflicts and the impression of cultural colonisation among the Dayak sub-ethnic groups, whose diversity is vast. This approach preserves the uniqueness and richness of each sub-ethnic culture, while uniting all members with a common vision and goal.

Interlocutors describe several requirements to become a member of TBBR. First, prospective members must have Dayak blood or descent to preserve cultural identity. Non-Dayak individuals can join as sympathisers, not as core members; similarly, members of the Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist faiths can only participate as sympathisers. Prospective members must go through a strict procedure, including completing a registration form, obtaining parental permission, and understanding the organisation's goals, which emphasise preserving customs rather than mere physical invulnerability.

This organisation demands a serious commitment to customary values, such as the *Nyangahatn* and *Babore* rituals, and considers those who reject these customs ineligible. Members are also expected to be active in various organisational activities to preserve cultural heritage, strengthen solidarity, and advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples and regional development. In addition, members must undergo the *Basasah* or *Bapani* ritual as a spiritual cleansing that strengthens the connection with ancestors, serves as a customary affirmation, and maintains the balance of energy and harmony with the spiritual world. The entire process demonstrates the importance of members' sincerity and commitment to preserving the continuity of Dayak traditions and culture through TBBR. The commitment also includes the obligation for all members to observe food taboos.

By requiring a high level of commitment from its members, the TBBR organisation plays a vital role in preserving the Dayak people's customs, traditions, and local wisdom. They are consistently dedicated to maintaining the continuity of traditions and local wisdom that form the foundation of the Dayak community's social and spiritual life, rooted in devotion to their ancestors' customs. In practice, TBBR carries out various cultural and social activities aimed not only at keeping traditions alive but also at ensuring that these cultures can develop and adapt in response to the rapidly changing challenges of the modern era. Through festivals, traditional dances, customary rituals, local wisdom training, and a variety of other cultural and social initiatives, TBBR actively revitalises noble values that depict a way of life in harmony with nature and the universe, as inherited from the ancestors. These activities also strengthen social solidarity and cohesion among members who are widely dispersed across Kalimantan, including those near the Malaysian border, such as in Sarawak. Studies reveal that rituals, which are practices repeatedly performed, increase interaction among members, leading to the establishment of emotional ties and group solidarity (Kisjuhas, 2024).

However, the challenge lies in balancing respect for tradition with adequate dietary intake. Traditional food taboos sometimes restrict the consumption of nutritious foods that

are essential for health, while modern health practices emphasise balanced diets to maintain well-being. By enforcing these taboos, TBBR educates members to be selective in choosing and consuming certain foods that could disrupt the balance of the body and soul, thereby helping maintain overall health. Sada et al (2019, pp. 6–7) argue that balancing traditional values and general education is essential for Dayak from early childhood. By adhering to food taboos, members become role models and educators for the next generation, teaching the significance of respecting tradition. This ensures cultural values remain alive amid changing times. In this context, education can help them avoid forming negative habits that violate traditional values. Not only is it beneficial for individuals, but education can also open pathways for communication and connection with the global community, thereby promoting international group values.

Therefore, adjustments and education are necessary to respect cultural traditions without compromising the body's nutritional needs. This balance ensures the continuation of valuable traditions while supporting the health and sustenance of community members. Studies on Dayak communities highlight the importance of counselling and education to correct misconceptions about food taboos (Ilawati & Sofiyanti, 2022). Others argue about the relations between food taboos in pregnant and breastfeeding women to ensure balanced nutrition and prevent adverse health impacts (Acire et al., 2023).

For TBBR, natural foods consumed together and rituals such as *Gawai* Dayak symbolise purity and order that bind the community. Conversely, the taboo system functions to delineate to its members what is considered dirty and forbidden, which, if violated, brings spiritual pollution and danger. Prohibitions against meats such as snake, cow, dog, and goat, as well as drugs and alcohol, are not merely physical bans but violations of the cosmic and moral order that threaten magical power and mental clarity. Similar to Douglas's theory of "Purity and Dirt", the concepts of 'clean' and 'dirty' are not merely about physical cleanliness but also social mechanisms to classify the world, uphold social structures, and strengthen group identity (Ditlevsen & Andersen, 2021; Douglas, 2002). Douglas's theory, along with the revised interpretation by Ditlevsen and Andersen, is particularly significant as it elucidates the role of taboos as social mechanisms that uphold social order and foster collective identity. Obedience to these taboos is an important act performed by members to maintain the purity of categories and to preserve the TBBR identity and solidarity as an organisation.

The practices can be interpreted as ways to help them maintain solidarity and strengthen the community's efforts to preserve Dayak culture in the era of globalisation. Group solidarity is constructed by promoting group identity to enhance in-group attachment, while avoiding othering and preventing conflicts among members and outsiders (Gupta, 2024; Kišjuhas, 2024). From the interlocutors' perspective, the primary function of these taboos is to help balance the lives of individuals and groups by supporting traditions and maintaining social harmony within the TBBR. Following the taboos symbolises a commitment to preserving spiritual strength, health, and the honour of the Dayak community within TBBR. This conceptualisation aligns with Douglas' theory's aim

to maintain social and physical orders by defining what is pure and dirty (or dangerous) for the community (Ditlevsen & Andersen, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that food taboos within Tariu Borneo Bangkule Rajakng (TBBR) are not merely dietary restrictions, but a complex cultural system that integrates spiritual, physical, moral, and social dimensions. The prohibition of certain substances and foods, such as drugs, alcoholic drinks, snake meat, beef, goat meat, and several vegetables, reflects the members' understanding of purity, bodily discipline, ancestral respect, and collective well-being. These taboos help maintain physical and mental balance, prevent harmful behaviours, and strengthen members' adherence to customary values. Through practices such as food abstinence, ritual cleansing, and collective ceremonies, TBBR members affirm their connection with ancestral spirits while reinforcing solidarity and Dayak cultural identity. In this sense, food taboos operate as symbolic boundaries between what is considered pure and impure, safe and dangerous, disciplined and excessive. This finding aligns with Douglas's concept of purity and dirt, showing that food prohibitions are not only about food itself, but also about the social and spiritual order that regulates communal life.

In the broader context of Indonesia as a multi-religious society, the food taboos practised by TBBR show how ancestral spirituality, customary law, and modern religious life can coexist within a plural social landscape. These practices do not simply represent a closed traditional system, but reveal how indigenous communities negotiate cultural identity, moral discipline, and spiritual belonging amid modernisation, religious diversity, and changing social values. Therefore, this study contributes to the development of anthropological knowledge by showing that food taboos can be read as cultural mechanisms of identity formation, social cohesion, and organisational authority. However, this study is limited to the TBBR community in Pontianak; further research should compare food taboo practices among different Dayak subgroups in West Kalimantan to provide a broader understanding of their variation and transformation. In terms of policy, local governments should recognise food taboos and related rituals as part of indigenous cultural heritage that requires protection, documentation, and dialogue-based cultural education. Collaboration among government institutions, customary leaders, and indigenous organisations is important to ensure that cultural preservation, public health, environmental protection, and development policies are aligned without weakening the authority and dignity of local communities.

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## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI tools Grammarly and Chatgpt to improve readability and grammar checking. The authors are responsible for evaluating the outcome of such AI before implementing it in the manuscript.

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