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Linguistic and Cultural Dimensions in the Names of Dwarf Creatures in Indonesian Mythology

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Abstract

This research explores the linguistic and cultural dimensions of dwarf creatures' names in Indonesian mythology. The main focus is analyzing the referential system in naming dwarf creatures and revealing their socio-cultural functions in society. Using a qualitative approach with ethnographic design, this study analyzes data from folklore documentation and ethnographic records. The results show that the referential system in naming dwarf creatures refers to various aspects such as physical characteristics (Uhang Pandak, Manusia Katai), traits and behaviors (Tuyul, Mentek), and geographical locations and mythological origins (Suku Mante, Suku Oni). Culturally, dwarf creatures function as complex social control mechanisms, covering aspects of economic morality (Tuyul), human-nature relationships (Mentek, Orang Bunian), and social identity (Ebu Gogo). This research reveals that the existence of dwarf creatures in Indonesian mythology is not merely a supernatural construction but represents a belief system reflecting the archipelagic society's values, norms, and local wisdom.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian society has long been closely associated with mystical elements. Munna and Ayundasari (2021) state that the beliefs held by society before the arrival of organized religions were animism and dynamism. (Widiastuti, 2023) explains that beliefs related to the astral realm, supernatural, and inanimate objects thought to possess power or spirits have marked this relationship. This indicates that society has long been familiar with supernatural matters. The life experiences of communities, later enriched into folklore or fairy tales, further strengthen the mystical impressions that exist. According to Geertz (1976), belief in mysticism, as seen in Javanese society, is like applied metaphysics that emerges from life experiences and becomes practical rules in daily life. Therefore, it is not surprising that people often associate unusual events with supernatural elements.

One of the familiar supernatural creatures in community culture is the dwarf creature. Although spread across various islands, their representations are not much different, such as in terms of size and behavior. However, in terms of naming, some variations adopt the naming system from each region. Suyuti et al. (2024) and Basir (2017) state that naming is not just an identity but contains hidden meanings related to the life and traditions of the community.

Dwarf creatures in Indonesian mythology represent a complex cultural phenomenon, reflecting the dynamics of the relationship between humans and the supernatural world deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the archipelago's communities. Widiastuti (2023) affirms that belief in supernatural entities manifests the animistic and dynamistic systems that existed long before the influence of organized religions entered Indonesia. The existence of dwarf creatures is not merely folklore but a symbolic representation of how local communities understand the relationship between the real world and the metaphysical.

Dwarf creatures can be categorized as social constructions with multidimensional functions in society's belief structure. Geertz (1973) explains that myths are not merely fantasy narratives but complex knowledge systems that define a society's social and cosmological reality. In the context of dwarf creatures, each variant, such as Orang Bunian, Ebu Gogo, or Tuyul, has deep cultural significance, revealing mechanisms of social control, moral values, and society's perception of supernatural powers.

According to Fox (2011), each ethnic group builds its narrative about supernatural creatures. It is not just a story to instill fear but a knowledge

system that explains the relationship between humans, nature, and the paranormal world. The name Ebu Gogo is a linguistic construction rich in cultural meaning, reflecting the complexity of the symbolic system of the Flores community. Etymologically, "Ebu" means grandmother or old woman, while "Gogo" refers to the practice of meat-eating, depicting the mythological creature as a frightening and primitive entity.

Naming is a linguistic process used to represent a group Suyuti et al. (2024). Forth (2005) states that this terminology is not just a narrative label but a profound representation of the relationship between Flores society with the environment and the concept of strangeness. Based on research by Brown et al. (2004), narratives about Ebu Gogo may be related to the collective memory of the community regarding encounters with ancient human species, such as *Homo floresiensis*, found in the region.

The meaning structure of Ebu Gogo contains complex metaphorical dimensions in Flores's society. The metaphorical dimension of Ebu Gogo represents the psychological and social complexity of the community. Through narratives about meat-eating dwarf creatures, society builds a value system that determines the boundaries of social behavior, expresses collective fears, and builds mechanisms of social control.

According to Barthes (1972), this phenomenon embodies a sign system transcending literal meaning, where each narrative element contains complex and layered symbolic content. Suyuti et al. (2024) state that names given by society usually refer to external language references. This is inseparable from the arbitrary nature of language without requiring a relationship between the signifier and the signified (Wijana, 2014; Chaer, 2009). On the other hand, language also functions as a medium of expression or conveying emotions and feelings from the speaker to the listener (Winata Putri & Yudi Utomo, 2021).

Della & Widhyasmaramurti (2023) found six ghost name data in Java with 23 different meanings. The meanings given refer to aspects such as characteristics, physical form, location, and personality. Meanwhile, Athiya (2020), in a study of supernatural creatures in America, found that references used for naming were related to gender, place, physical form, objects, and animals. This shows that the American perspective is anthropocentric. Fakihammad (2015) also revealed that Sasak society has long been closely related to supernatural elements. The supernatural beliefs they embrace include (1) belief in the existence of Wali Allah, (2) belief in prophetic visions, intuition,

and dreams, and (3) belief in the power of supernatural beings (jinn and angels).

Unlike previous research that tended to examine supernatural creatures separately from linguistic aspects Della & Widhyasmaramurti (2023); Athiya (2020) or cultural aspects Fakihuddin (2015), this research aims to provide new contributions by (a) Analyzing the intersection between linguistic referential systems and socio-cultural functions in the naming of dwarf creatures. (b) Comprehensively mapping regional variations in naming dwarf creatures in various regions in Indonesia. (c) Revealing how linguistic constructions in naming contribute to the formation of collective identity and social solidarity in society

From an onomastic perspective, the names of dwarf creatures in Indonesian mythology are important to study for three fundamental reasons. First, this naming system is a cultural heritage that reflects local wisdom and society's worldview regarding the supernatural but has not been systematically documented. This aligns with Eco's (1976) view that names in myths are not merely simple markers but sign systems with complex networks of meaning.

Second, amid the flow of modernization, understanding the meaning and social function of dwarf creatures risks being lost if not studied scientifically. Third, analyzing the relationship between linguistic constructions in naming and their socio-cultural functions can provide a deeper understanding of traditional social control mechanisms, in line with Saussure's (1959) theory that each linguistic sign is a social construction with an arbitrary but significant relationship between the signifier and the signified in a cultural context. Therefore, this research seeks to reveal the relationship between linguistic constructions in naming dwarf creatures and their role as representations of belief systems in Indonesian society.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design that focuses on analyzing the referential system in naming dwarf creatures and their cultural dimensions within Indonesian mythology. The referential system in naming is a semantic system that connects names with various categories of meaning, such as physical characteristics, behavior, origin, and geographical location. It also contains symbolic dimensions that reflect the community's values, norms, and local wisdom. Creswell (2018) states that a qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of social and cultural phenomena

by considering the complexities of meaning formed in their natural context. The ethnographic design was chosen to understand how this naming system reflects the dynamics of the relationship between humans and the supernatural world in the collective consciousness of the archipelago's society.

Data collection was conducted through a comprehensive literature review of folklore documentation, ancient manuscripts, and ethnographic records regarding dwarf creatures in various regions of Indonesia. The collected data includes the etymology of names, the referential system in naming, the cultural context of their emergence, and their function as representations of belief systems within the community.

Data analysis adapts the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The data is categorized based on the referential system in naming and its socio-cultural functions as mechanisms of social control. Data is presented as an analysis matrix to observe the relationship between linguistic constructs and their roles in shaping the community's belief systems. This approach is reinforced by Jakobson's (1960) theory of language functions and Sapir's (1929) hypothesis about language as a conceptual map that shapes how humans understand reality, including supernatural phenomena in local mythology.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dwarf creatures are believed to be supernatural beings whose existence is spread across various regions of Indonesia. They have become an integral part of the local belief systems since the era of animism and dynamism. These beings appear in various forms and names in each area, yet they share common characteristics, notably their small or miniature body size. In Jambi, they are known as Uhang Pandak, while in Flores, they are referred to as Ebu Gogo. The Malay-Minang community recognizes Orang Bunian, whereas in Aceh and Sulawesi, they are known as Suku Mante and Suku Oni, respectively. In Java, several dwarf creatures are recognized, such as Siwil, believed to inhabit the Meru Betiri National Park; Tuyul, known as a thief; Bajang, thought to be the spirit of a baby; and Mentek, considered a pest of rice plants.

Despite their diverse names and characteristics, these dwarf creatures play a significant role in shaping the community's belief systems and social values. Hendokumoro (2023) states that through language, communities can express cultural traits and identities among people. Ultimately, they are not only part of folklore but

also serve as mechanisms of social control that help communities understand and interpret the relationship between the real world and the supernatural. The existence of dwarf creatures in Indonesian mythology reflects the complexity of the relationship between humans, nature, and the supernatural world deeply rooted in the collective

consciousness of the archipelago's society. Each variant of dwarf creatures holds profound cultural significance, functioning not only as tales that evoke fear but also as a system of knowledge that explains the social and cosmological realities of the local community.

Table 1. *Matrix of characteristics of dwarf creatures*

Name	Physical Character	Places	Behavior	Supernatural Powers
<i>Uhang Pandak</i>	Small/short body	Forest	Group Living	Strong and agile
<i>Ebu Gogo</i>	Small body, primitive	Cave and forest	Meat eaters, aggressive	Physical Strength
<i>Orang Bunian</i>	Mini, human-like body	Forest	Likes to hide	Ability to Disappear
<i>Suku Mante</i>	Small Body	Forest	Wild and Childish	Agile and Fast
<i>Suku Oni</i>	Mini/Small	Forest	Group Living	Speed and Strength
<i>Siwil</i>	Small	Forest	Group Living and Likes to hunt fish in the river	Speed and Strength
<i>Tuyul</i>	Small, bald, and childlike	Residential areas	Thief	Stealing Ability
<i>Bajang</i>	Tiny (like a baby, his body is blood red)	residential areas, especially those where there are babies and pregnant women	Annoying and frightening	Disturbing Children (babies) and Pregnant Women
<i>Mentek</i>	Small	Rice Fields	Plant Destruction	Ability to Damage Rice

Referential System in the Names of Dwarf Creatures

The names of dwarf creatures in mythology exhibit a diverse referential system. As Geertz (1992) noted, the references in names tend to reflect the socio-cultural conditions of the community. The references in naming these creatures are physical aspects, traits, gender, character, geographical location, and mythological origins. Each name carries a complex cultural meaning that transcends mere identification and reveals the local community's belief systems and symbolic structures.

Names such as *Uhang Pandak* and *Manusia Katai* demonstrate a direct approach, with explicit references to physical characteristics. This aligns with Saussure's (1959) notion of the arbitrary yet significant relationship between the signifier and the signified in the social construction of language. *Uhang Pandak*, widespread among the Jambi community, employs a transparent linguistic structure, where "Uhang" means "person" and "pandak" means "short," literally representing body size.

In contrast, names like *Ebu Gogo* from Flores illustrate a more complex referential system. Barthes (1972) emphasizes that each narrative element contains symbolic meanings that are not straightforward. In this case, the name "Ebu," meaning "grandmother," introduces a dimension of kinship, while "Gogo," connoting "flesh-eater," refers to a predatory nature. Thus, the name *Ebu Gogo* creates meaning beyond mere physical description. Furthermore, Fox (2011) states that each ethnic group constructs its own narrative about supernatural beings, not only to instill fear but as a system of knowledge about the relationships between humans, nature, and the supernatural world. The name of the dwarf creature *Orang Bunian* in Malay-Minang culture refers to a dwarf that likes to hide; "Orang" means "human," while "Bunian" means "spirit in the forest." This creature is believed by the Minang-Malay community to inhabit the forests and occasionally reveal itself to humans, but it quickly runs away to hide. Therefore, the community names it *Orang Bunian*.

On the other hand, there are two names for dwarf creatures in Aceh and Sulawesi, identified as

Suku, as some community members believe they have encountered them in large numbers. These two mythological groups are Suku Mante and Suku Oni. "Mante" in Acehnese means "people of the mantra; foreign ethnic group; wild people living in the forest; childish." Meanwhile, Suku Oni, originating from Bone, Sulawesi, is believed to refer to mini humans with superpowers. Both groups represent the complexity of the local cultural realities. Siwil, found in the Meru Betiri National Park, can be translated from Javanese as "Little Person." The naming reference for this creature uses Javanese identification, which directly signifies the mini creature. Although interpreted as small, this creature possesses extraordinary strength and speed. This aligns with Saussure's principles of signifier and signified.

Next, the dwarf creature that is very popular in Indonesia is the tuyul. This creature is well-known as a ghostly thief whose master commands it; tuyul is often interpreted as small-bodied with exceptional eyesight and running speed. Therefore, it uses these traits to steal money and give it to its master. Literally, "tuyul" is believed to derive from the word "takhayul," which has been absorbed into "tuyul." This indicates its ghostly nature, resonating with the meaning of "takhayul," which refers to something imaginary. The creature named Bajang is quite popular among the Javanese community as it is believed to be a ghost originating from a baby's spirit. The name Bajang refers to meanings of "small" or "deformed," This relates to the condition of a newborn baby that has died, causing its spirit to wander and become a supernatural being.

Mentek is believed to be a cousin of the tuyul; both are small-bodied, but Mentek is known for stealing rice. Farmers often associate Mentek with pests that damage rice crops. Mentek is interpreted as "something that does not grow well," metaphorically understood as its impact on rice. From a word formation perspective, the names of small or dwarf creatures in Indonesian mythology show diverse etymological characteristics, most originating from indigenous regional languages.

Uhang Pandak from Jambi Malay directly describes physical characteristics where 'uhang' means 'person' and 'pandak' means 'short.' Similarly, Ebu Gogo from Flores uses native language without foreign influence, with 'ebu' meaning 'grandmother' and 'gogo' referring to 'meat eater.' Orang Bunian combines the Malay word 'orang' (person) with 'bunian,' which relates to invisibility or forest spirits. At the same time, Suku Oni from Sulawesi represents an interesting case as an acronym of 'Orang Mini' (Mini People) shortened to 'Oni.'

Tuyul demonstrates linguistic transformation, believed to derive from 'takhayul' (superstition), which underwent phonological changes over time. As Hickey (2019) notes, lexical borrowings often undergo phonological adaptation to conform to the sound patterns of the recipient language. In this process, borrowed terms may be significantly altered while their semantic core remains recognizable. The word 'takhayul' comes from Arabic and entered Nusantara vocabulary through Islamization, showing how foreign linguistic elements were incorporated into local mythological naming. This contrasts with creatures like Siwil, Bajang, and Mentek, which all originate from native Javanese without significant foreign influence, with Siwil meaning 'small,' Bajang referring to spirits of deceased babies, and Mentek meaning 'stunted' or 'not growing well.'

The etymological diversity in these names reflects not only the physical features or behaviors of these mythological beings but also the broader linguistic history and cultural contacts that have shaped Indonesian society. These naming patterns demonstrate how communities throughout the archipelago developed vocabulary to describe supernatural entities based on local beliefs, environmental factors, and cultural exchanges. This linguistic analysis provides insight into the mythological worldview and the historical development of language across the Nusantara region, showing the complex interplay between folklore, language evolution, and cultural identity.

Table 2. Matrix of Meaning and References of Dwarf Creatures

Name	Etymology	Reference System	Construction of Meaning	Language Functions
<i>Uhang Pandak</i>	Uhang (people) + Pandak (short)	Physical	Direct Descriptive	References
<i>Ebu Gogo</i>	Ebu (grandmother) and Gogo (meat eaters)	Kinship+Behavior	Complex metaphors	Emotive
<i>Orang Bunian</i>	Orang (people) + Bunian (hidden / spirit creatures)	Identity + Habitat	Descriptive-symbolic	References
<i>Suku Mante</i>	Mante (foreign/wild groups)	Social-Behavior	Social categorization	Conative

<i>Suku Oni</i>	Oni (mini and powerful)	Physical + Ability	Descriptive attributive	References
<i>Siwil</i>	Siwil (little)	Physical	Direct Descriptive	References
<i>Tuyul</i>	From the word "takhayul"	Supernatural Properties	Derivative	Metalingual
<i>Bajang</i>	ghosts with long hooves	Origin	Metaphor	Emotive
<i>Mentek</i>	It does not grow well	impacts/consequences	Metaphor	Conative

Cultural Dimensions of Small Mythical Beings in Indonesian Mythology

Tiny mythical beings in Indonesian mythology are not merely supernatural entities but social constructs that serve multidimensional societal functions. Referring to Geertz's (1973) perspective, myths are not simply fantastic narratives but complex knowledge systems that explain social and cosmological realities. Moreover, names resulting from linguistic processes inherently contain implicit meanings ((Khairumi, 2024)).

Social Control Mechanisms

Tuyul as a Representation of Economic Morality. The Tuyul figure is a complex metaphor for economic morality in Indonesian society. Its existence explores the tension between material ambition and ethics, where this supernatural being manifests as a spiritual punishment for those tempted to acquire wealth through fraudulent means. Each act of theft by a Tuyul represents not merely a criminal act but a profound moral warning about the consequences of greed, reminding society that wealth obtained through dishonest means will bring spiritual catastrophes far greater than temporary gains.

Mentek and Human-Nature Relationships. The Mentek creature symbolizes introspection regarding human-nature relationships in Indonesian agrarian society. This being presents a complex narrative about ecological balance and human dependency on natural resources through its diminutive yet destructive presence. Its presence is not merely a threat to harvest yields but a symbolic warning about respecting nature, inviting society to reflect on sustainable agricultural practices and consider the consequences of excessive exploitation of natural resources.

Bajang and the Importance of Preserving Life. The presence of this being carries complex psychological and cultural implications in Indonesian mythology. This mysterious figure presents a subtle yet profound social control mechanism related to nurturing practices, birth, and human life cycles. Through its narrative, society is reminded of life's fragility, the importance of child care, and the spiritual consequences of

negligence in protecting young generations. Bajang is not merely a frightening ghost but a collective representation of social trauma, fear of early death, and the importance of preserving life.

Orang Bunian and Environmental Protection. This figure is an invisible guardian of territorial boundaries between the human and supernatural realms. Its existence creates a complex liminal zone where humans are reminded of their power limitations and the importance of respecting sacred spaces beyond their comprehension. Each tale of Orang Bunian, who quickly disappears or disturbs those who violate their territory, functions as a social control mechanism regulating human relationships with the environment, fostering respect and caution toward ununderstood forces.

Ebu Gogo and Social Identity: This creature presents a complex narrative about identity formation and social exclusion mechanisms. This figure is more than just a mythological flesh-eating creature; it symbolizes society's fears of the "foreign" and "unknown." Through its narrative construction, society forms boundaries of cultural identity, defining itself through differentiation from "the other." The Ebu Gogo narrative becomes a medium to explore the complexities of intergroup relations, revealing psychological and social mechanisms underlying collective identity formation.

Uhang Pandak, Siwil, and Dwarf Humans: The Importance of Forest Conservation. These beings symbolize the relationship between humans and forests and pristine areas. Their presence in forest areas creates social control mechanisms that encourage society to be more prudent in managing and preserving forest regions. Through narratives about these small forest-dwelling creatures, society is reminded that forests are not merely natural resources but sacred spaces inhabited by supernatural entities that must be respected. When someone intends to enter or exploit the forest, stories about these creatures serve as reminders to act with careful consideration and respect for nature.

Oni and Mante Tribes: The Importance of Maintaining Trust, Identity, and Solidarity. The existence of these two mythological tribes presents

more complex narratives within society's belief system. As groups believed to live in isolated communities, they become symbols of cultural diversity and the importance of respecting differences. Narratives about these tribes function as social control mechanisms regulating intergroup relations in society. Through stories about the Oni Tribe's supernatural powers and the Mante Tribe's wild yet childlike nature, society is reminded of the importance of maintaining social harmony and respecting different groups, even invisible ones. Their existence also serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving traditional values and collective identity amid changing times.

Between Identity and Solidarity: The Existence of Small Mythical Beings as Social Facts

Tiny mythical beings across various Indonesian cultures have captured the attention of society and researchers. Beyond their existence, which is "believed" by specific segments of society, there are intriguing elements that serve as common threads. These tiny mythical beings emerge as representations of identity, providing markers that indicate identical phenomena despite manifesting within different cultural spaces.

Tiny mythical beings present themselves as a form of social fact, revealing interesting patterns in constructing societal identity and solidarity. Durkheim (1982) emphasizes that social facts are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside the individual and possess coercive power that controls individuals. In this context, beliefs about tiny mythical beings become social facts that shape collective societal behavior.

Furthermore, from a linguistic perspective, naming tiny mythical beings reflects society's cognitive classification system. As explained by Suyuti (2024) and Whorf (1956), language describes reality and shapes how society understands the world. This is evident in consistent naming patterns that utilize references to size (*pandak*, *katai* [dwarf]), character (*bunian* [ethereal], *gogo* [primitive]), and social function (*tuyul* [wealth-stealing spirit], *mentek* [crop-destroying spirit]). Kramsch (2011) adds that language is a symbolic system that conveys meaning and constructs social reality. The similarity in characteristics of tiny mythical beings across different regions demonstrates shared cognitive patterns within Indonesian society. Lévi-Strauss (1963) states that myths possess universal basic structures despite their varying manifestations. This is evident in several aspects:

1. Universal Moral Messages

(a). Maintaining natural balance (Orang Bunian, Siwil, Dwarf Humans, Oni Tribe, Mante

Tribe, Uhang Pandak); (b) Prohibition of greed (Tuyul, Mentek); (c) Respect for life (Bajang).

The existence of dwarf creatures in Indonesian mythology remains powerfully relevant in contemporary society due to Indonesia's deeply rooted belief systems that continue to embrace mystical elements. Despite rapid modernization, beliefs in the supernatural world and mythological beings persist in the collective consciousness of Indonesian communities, both in rural and urban areas, demonstrating remarkable resilience against globalization.

2. **Construction of Collective Identity** Hoffman and Moran (2018) explain that supernatural narratives are crucial in group identity formation. In the context of tiny mythical beings, each region develops local variants that reflect their community's specific values while maintaining similar basic structures.
3. **Collective Solidarity** Durkheim (1982) explains that traditional societies are bound by collective solidarity based on shared beliefs and sentiments. Belief in tiny mythical beings reinforces this solidarity through (a) communal rituals, (b) collective values, and (c) social norms.
4. **Social Integration Function** Parsons (1951) emphasizes that belief systems function to integrate society. Tiny mythical beings play roles in (a) maintaining social cohesion, (b) strengthening collective norms, and (c) preserving system equilibrium.

From a cultural perspective, the existence of tiny mythical beings reflects what Geertz (1973) refers to as a "web of significance" - a network of meaning constructed by humans. Each variant of tiny mythical beings represents a node in this network, connecting aspects of (a) spiritual-material, (b) individual-collective, (c) tradition-modernity

These mythological beings maintain their effectiveness as social control mechanisms in several regions. In traditional agricultural areas, tales of Mentek are still used to instill sustainable natural resource management ethics. At the same time, in forest regions, narratives about Uhang Pandak, Siwil, and other forest dwellers effectively prevent excessive exploitation of forest resources. Similarly, the Tuyul story serves as a relevant moral warning about the dangers of greed and the desire for instant wealth, finding new forms as metaphors for unethical economic practices in the modern digital era.

CONCLUSION

This research examines the linguistic and cultural dimensions of dwarf creatures' names in Indonesian mythology. Through a qualitative approach with ethnographic design, this study successfully identified the referential system in naming dwarf creatures and revealed their socio-cultural functions within Indonesian society. The findings indicate that the naming system of dwarf creatures references various aspects such as physical characteristics (*Uhang Pandak*, *Manusia Katai*), traits and behaviors (*Tuyul*, *Mentek*), and geographical location and mythological origins (*Suku Mante*, *Suku Oni*). These beings exist as supernatural entities and as complex social control mechanisms within society, regulating economic morality, human-nature relationships, and social identity formation.

The existence of dwarf creatures represents a belief system reflecting the archipelagic society's local values and wisdom. As social facts, beliefs in dwarf creatures shape collective behavior and maintain societal solidarity through universal moral messages such as the prohibition of greed, the importance of maintaining natural balance, and respect for life. The cross-regional similarities in these mythological beings demonstrate shared cognitive patterns across Indonesian cultures, highlighting how these narratives contribute to cultural identity formation while promoting social cohesion. Despite pressures from modernization, these traditional belief systems continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, indicating their profound significance in Indonesian cultural heritage.

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