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Naming practices and cultural meanings of supernatural beings in Banjarese society: An onomastic and linguistic anthropology study

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ABSTRACT

The existence of supernatural beings in Banjarese society reflects culturally constructed understandings transmitted through language, particularly through the names assigned to such entities. This study examines the naming patterns of supernatural beings in Banjarese culture using a linguistic anthropology approach and an inductive analytical method. Data were drawn from eight lexicons collected through non-participant observation and interviews with native speakers. Each lexicon was analyzed using Husen's (1999) deictic framework and further validated through informant responses and supporting textual sources. The findings show that the naming of Banjarese supernatural beings is systematically organized around two deictic dimensions—personal and spatial—which manifest in three naming patterns: animal-based, human-like, and origin-based. These patterns reveal that naming practices function as cultural representations that encode ecological experience, moral values, and local cosmology. Overall, the study demonstrates that linguistic forms provide a window into the cultural worldview of the Banjarese community and contribute to broader discussions on how language reflects and structures cultural perceptions of the unseen.

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INTRODUCTION

The existence of supernatural beings is understood differently from religious and cultural perspectives. Every cultural tribe has its own local wisdom (Karimah & Wediyantoro, 2025). In religion, particularly Islam, the existence of the unseen (*makhluk gaib*) is part of faith (*aqidah*), as exemplified by the concepts of *jinn* and *iblis*

in the Qur'an. From a cultural standpoint, however, supernatural beings are social constructions. Narratives involving them, such as myths and legends, are cultural products passed down through generations. It is this culturally constructed naming of supernatural entities that forms the focus of the present study.

In Indonesian linguistic tradition, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI V) defines *makhluk gaib* or *makhluk halus* as beings believed to live in a supernatural realm beyond the physical world, such as demons and *jin*. The word *gaib* itself is interpreted as something invisible, hidden, and term *gaib* denotes something invisible or hidden, while *halus* suggests subtlety and imperceptibility to the human eye (Sari, 2015). Although the physical and spiritual worlds are believed to exist separately, they are also thought to interact, usually through disturbances. Daud (1997, p. 403) identifies these disruptive supernatural beings into three groups: those originating from humans, those not originating from humans but once familiar with them, and other non-human spirits. This conceptualization indicates that discussions of supernatural beings often involve *jinn*, spirits, demons, and ghosts. Davies (2007) defines a ghost as “a manifestation of the soul of the dead before the living,” emphasizing the ontological nature of a spirit that reveals itself to humans. This definition provides a foundation for understanding ghosts as manifestations of invisible souls that may appear in various forms. However, contemporary ethnographic studies demonstrate that such manifestations cannot be detached from their social and cultural contexts. For instance, Mencej (2021) shows that ghost narratives in post-war Srebrenica are not merely individual experiences but also collective representations that reflect historical trauma, preserve communal memory, and reclaim spaces lost to conflict. Thus, apparitions interpreted as manifestations of the dead possess not only spiritual dimensions but also social, political, and cultural functions that strengthen collective identity.

Across the Indonesian archipelago, each ethnic group possesses distinct supernatural figures embedded in its oral traditions. The Javanese recognize *memedi*, *lelembut*, and *tuyul* (Geertz, 1989), the Balinese refer to *Leak*, and the Sundanese speak of *Iprit* or *Setan Maung*. These variations show that supernatural beings are culturally situated and linguistically encoded. For the Banjarese of South Kalimantan, supernatural entities such as *Kuyang*, *Mariyaban*, *Datu Baduk*, or *Hantu Baranak* constitute a living part of cultural memory. They appear in stories, taboos (*pamali*), ritual practices, and everyday expressions. Ritual offerings, for instance during weddings, include *piduduk*—rice, brown sugar, and an old coconut placed beneath the bridal platform—to protect the bride from spiritual disturbances (Syarifah, 2019). Likewise, children learn behavioral norms through supernatural warnings such as “*ditangkap mariyaban*” or “*diigut kuyang*.” These oral expressions illustrate how beliefs about the unseen are transmitted from one generation to another and how moral and

social values are internalized through narrative and linguistic means (Dwiyani et al., 2024).

Naming practices are an integral part of language and culture, functioning not only as labels but also as cultural representations that reflect a community's worldview. In many societies, including the Banjarese of South Kalimantan, supernatural beings form part of a rich cultural imagination shaped through oral traditions, beliefs, and collective memory. These entities, whether feared, respected, or symbolically interpreted, are embedded in local narratives and are transmitted across generations through stories, taboos (*pamali*), rituals, and daily expressions. Likewise, the Banjarese, particularly those in traditional communities, believe in supernatural entities such as *Datu Baduk*, *Kuyang*, *Takau*, and *Hantu Baranak*. Their existence is thought to influence various aspects of daily life, including the human life cycle. This belief is reflected in ritual offerings during life-cycle ceremonies such as birth, marriage, and death. For instance, during a wedding, the Banjarese prepare *piduduk*. It comprises rice, brown sugar, and an old coconut, and is placed beneath the bridal platform to protect the couple, especially the bride, from disturbances or possession by spirits. As Syarifah (2019, pp. 50–51) notes, “*Piduduk* offerings such as rice, brown sugar, and a mature coconut are placed beneath the bridal dais as part of customary ritual practices.”

Studies on supernatural entities within linguistic anthropology have shown that ghost-related lexicons carry both religious and cultural meanings. Sari (2015) identifies the cultural logic embedded in Indonesian ghost terminology, while Muafina (2013) demonstrates how ghost names in Majalengka encode local wisdom, warnings, and moral lessons. Similar work has examined the social construction of ghost figures in urban Kalimantan (Nasrullah, 2018), yet research focusing specifically on the naming mechanisms used by the Banjarese remains limited. Existing literature tends to describe supernatural characters or their narratives but lacks a linguistic analysis of the naming patterns themselves.

Understanding the cultural basis of supernatural naming is consistent with Koentjaraningrat's (1989) framework, which identifies beliefs in metaphysical beings as part of the religious element of culture. Each community's environment, worldview, and historical experience shape how supernatural beings are conceptualized and named. For the Banjarese, classifications often distinguish between human-derived spirits, familiar spirits, and ghosts (Daud, 1997). Such distinctions inevitably influence naming practices. The study also draws on onomastic theory. Crystal's (1987) division of onomastics into anthroponomastics and toponomastics is relevant because supernatural names, like personal names, can reflect identity, origin, or role. Molino's typology, later adapted by Husen et al. (1999) into three deictic dimensions—personal,

spatial, and temporal—provides a framework for analyzing how names encode aspects of identity and meaning.

Recent developments in cultural linguistics reinforce the link between language, cognition, and cultural worldview. Imai et al., (2020) argue that while perception shapes linguistic structure universally, culture mediates how individuals categorize and interpret experience. Zhou (2023) further shows that linguistic expression reflects internalized cultural frameworks and serves as a bridge between cognition and identity. These perspectives support the idea that supernatural naming is not arbitrary but grounded in culturally shaped conceptualizations.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the naming patterns of supernatural beings in Banjarese society. Naming is treated as a linguistic practice deeply rooted in cultural experience, ecological relationships, and collective memory. By analyzing the lexical items associated with supernatural beings, this study seeks to uncover how the Banjar people understand, interpret, and assign meaning to the unseen. Such an investigation offers valuable insight into the interplay between language, culture, thought, and identity in Banjarese society and contributes to broader discussions in linguistic anthropology and cultural linguistics.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in linguistic anthropology, with a specific focus on the cultural and semantic construction of supernatural naming in Banjarese society. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the meanings of supernatural lexicons are embedded in cultural practices, oral traditions, and community belief systems, all of which require interpretive rather than quantitative analysis. The study further employs an inductive analytical strategy, allowing patterns, categories, and theoretical insights to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori.

The primary objects of analysis are eight lexical items denoting supernatural beings in the Banjar language. These lexicons were selected because they appear widely in oral narratives, local myths, *pamali* expressions, and community discourse, thus representing culturally salient categories within Banjarese cosmology. The selection process was iterative: potential lexicons were first identified from oral narratives and cultural texts, then confirmed through interviews with native speakers to ensure their continued relevance in contemporary cultural knowledge.

Data collection was conducted through non-participant observation and in-depth interviews. Non-participant observation involved systematic examination of oral and written sources, including folktales, mythological narratives, ethnographic descriptions, and local publications. During this stage, detailed field notes were taken to document the form, usage, and contextual meanings of each lexicon. To validate

and enrich these observations, interviews were conducted with three native Banjarese informants who are active speakers of the Banjar language and familiar with local cultural traditions. The informants provided semantic explanations, cultural interpretations, and narrative examples that clarified the function and significance of each lexical item. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

The analytical process unfolded in multiple stages. First, each lexicon was examined for its basic meaning using *Kamus Bahasa Banjar* as the primary reference. In cases where a lexicon did not appear in the dictionary, its meaning was traced through supplementary sources such as local folklore books, regional ethnographies, and academic articles. Interview data were then used to verify these meanings and to contextualize them within contemporary cultural practices. Following semantic identification, the lexicons were categorized and interpreted using the theoretical frameworks of onomastics and linguistic anthropology. Particular attention was given to the operation of deictic dimensions—specifically personal and spatial deixis—as proposed by [Husen et al., \(1999\)](#), and to the ways in which morphological structures, semantic domains, and cultural associations shape the naming of supernatural beings.

Finally, the findings are presented through descriptive and narrative analysis. This form of presentation is intentional, as it preserves the cultural nuance and interpretive depth of the lexical items under study. Quantitative or tabular summaries are avoided except where supportive, since the goal of the research is to illuminate cultural meanings rather than to reduce them to numerical representations. Through this design, the study aims to provide a holistic understanding of how language, culture, ecology, and belief intersect in the naming of supernatural beings in Banjarese society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As noted by [Husen et al., \(1999\)](#), proper names may be classified according to three deictic dimensions—personal, spatial, and temporal. In the Banjarese naming of supernatural beings, only the personal and spatial dimensions are attested. The personal dimension encompasses names derived from animals or modeled after human naming patterns, whereas the spatial dimension concerns names grounded in an entity's locus of origin. The subsections below elaborate on these patterns. To provide a more straightforward overview, Table 1 summarizes all supernatural beings documented in this study.

Table 1. Naming Patterns of Supernatural Beings in Banjarese Culture

Name	Literal Meaning	Linguistic Structure	Deictic Dimension	Naming Pattern	Cultural Function
<i>Buhaya Kuning</i>	Yellow crocodile	N + Adj	Personal	Animal-based	Sacred guardian spirit
<i>Hantu Macan</i>	Tiger spirit	N + N	Personal	Animal-based	Forest-related danger, moral warning
<i>Hantu Badak</i>	Rhinoceros spirit	N + N	Personal	Symbolic-animal	Enforces respect for sacred space
<i>Kuyang</i>	Female flying-head ghost	Simple lexeme	Personal	Human-like	Postpartum protection, moral instruction
<i>Mariyaban</i>	Name-like human/ape entity	Proper name	Personal	Human-like	Wilderness danger, boundary figure
<i>Anak Sima</i>	Child-spirit	N + N	Personal	Hybrid (human + spirit)	Moral taboo, cosmological ambiguity
<i>Hantu Api</i>	Fire spirit	N + N	Spatial	Element-origin	Interpretation of fires; communal ritual
<i>Hantu Banyu</i>	Water/river spirit	N + N	Spatial	Element-origin	Interpretation of river phenomena

As summarized in Table 1, the naming patterns of supernatural beings in Banjarese culture are governed by two deictic dimensions as proposed by Husen et al., (1999): personal and spatial. Accordingly, the analysis is divided into three subsections. The first explores the personal deictic dimension through animal-based names, emphasizing ecological and symbolic associations. The second examines human-like names within the personal dimension, highlighting anthropomorphic representation and moral meaning. The final subsection addresses the spatial deictic dimension through origin-based names, demonstrating how environmental elements such as fire and water are linguistically conceptualized as supernatural domains.

Personal Dimension: Animal-Based Names

Animal-based names are a prominent feature in Banjarese supernatural vocabulary. These names typically mirror the community’s deep connection with river, forest, and mountain environments. Three supernatural entities are named after animals, although one symbolically references a species rather than a local one. Examples include *Buhaya Kuning*, *Hantu Macan / Macan Jajadian*, and *Hantu Badak*.

Banjarmasin famously known as the “City of a Thousand Rivers” is profoundly shaped by the Barito, Martapura, and other interconnected waterways. These rivers sustain commercial activity, transportation, domestic routines, and local

markets (Abbas et al., 2021; Iqra et al., 2025). Unsurprisingly, the crocodile (*buhaya*) emerges as a culturally significant figure in Banjarese cosmology. The name *buhaya kuning* (“yellow crocodile”) reflects not only zoological familiarity but also symbolic meaning. In Banjarese cultural practice, yellow is associated with sacredness and spiritual potency; it adorns ritual garments, grave markers, and sacred objects (Ideham, 2010). Thus, the epithet *kuning* imbues the crocodile with supernatural authority.

Oral accounts portray *buhaya kuning* as an inherited spiritual companion. If neglected, it may inflict harm; if respected, it may protect its keeper (Basrian et al., 2014). Ritual offerings (*Malabuh*)—such as yellow sticky rice, eggs, and bananas—serve to appease the spirit. Informant narratives further illustrate the perceived consequences of neglect, including possession-like episodes resolved only through ritual compliance. These narratives demonstrate how *buhaya kuning* reflects the entwinement of ecology, sacred symbolism, and ancestral spirituality in naming practices.

The second is the *hantu macan*, or *macan jajadian* (“shape-shifting tiger”), which epitomizes Banjarese engagements with the forested terrain of South Kalimantan. With approximately 721,000 hectares of forest (Global Forest Watch, 2024) and the Meratus mountain range spanning the region (Ideham, 2010), forests occupy both ecological and symbolic significance. Agricultural communities often remain in forest areas overnight, especially during harvest seasons, where encounters with *hantu macan* are believed possible. Informants describe the being as one that transforms either into a tiger or a *tuan guru* (pious man). The spirit is supposed to attack individuals sleeping outdoors, consuming vital organs. Its inclusion in *pamali* expressions, like ‘*Pamali mambanam acan malam Jumat, didatangi macan jajadian*’ (Pamali Banjar, 2006), shows its role in social norms and environmental awareness. The term ‘*hantu macan*’ thus represents ecological threats, respect for forest forces, and moral lessons.

The third example is *Hantu Badak*. Although rhinoceroses are not native to the Banjar region, the word ‘*badak*’ is used symbolically to denote supernatural strength. The ‘*hantu badak*’ is believed to inhabit sacred spaces like mosques (*langgar*), where any disrespect—such as sleeping in the imam’s designated spot—could result in spiritual repercussions: *Pamali guring di paimaman, bisa diangkat hantu badak*. This name symbolizes a metaphorical extension where a culturally acknowledged figure of strength serves as a supernatural enforcer of moral and spatial order. The phrase illustrates Geertz’s (1973) idea that language acts as an ethical structure within cultural systems.

Personal Dimension: Human-Like Names

When supernatural entities display human traits or behaviors, Banjarese naming practices naturally extend into forms that parallel human naming conventions. This pattern indicates a conceptual proximity between these beings and human social categories, suggesting that the supernatural is often rendered intelligible through anthropomorphic framing. Within this group, *Kuyang*, *Mariyaban*, and *Anak Sima* illustrate how linguistic choices encode both moral narratives and cosmological boundaries.

To begin with, *Kuyang* represents one of the most culturally salient examples of human-like supernatural naming. Widely recognized across South Kalimantan, *Kuyang* denotes a female spirit whose head and internal organs detach from the body to prey upon postpartum women (Daud, 1997). This belief shapes a series of protective practices—including the placement of mirrors, combs, shallots, and knives near mothers and infants, alongside Qur’anic recitations—which function as embodied responses to perceived spiritual threat. As a narrative construct, *Kuyang* reinforces norms of postpartum vigilance, prescribes acceptable behavior for women during vulnerable life stages, and encodes anxieties surrounding femininity, bodily boundaries, and ritual transgression. Its name thus operates not only as a referential label but also as a cultural shorthand for danger, morality, and gendered vulnerability.

Extending beyond domestic spaces, the figure of *Mariyaban* offers another illustration of human-like naming grounded in anthropomorphic representation. Commonly described as a large, hairy, primate-like being inhabiting remote forests, *Mariyaban* is believed to attack humans and animals and to possess hair imbued with supernatural potency—capable of granting invulnerability or even reviving the dead. Through its naming and narrative attributes, *Mariyaban* embodies the dangers associated with the wilderness and symbolizes the liminal space between human society and untamed nature. As such, it marks the conceptual boundary between the human and non-human worlds in Banjarese cosmology, functioning as both a mythic deterrent and a reminder of the risks inherent in venturing into forested areas.

Further extending this human-supernatural continuum, *Anak Sima* exemplifies a hybridized naming practice that encodes moral ambiguity and ontological liminality. Described as a half-human, half-spirit being raised by the powerful entity *Takau*, *Anak Sima* purportedly develops a desire for human hearts and lures victims by imitating the cry of a baby. Linguistically, the compound *anak sima* juxtaposes *anak* (“child”), which evokes innocence and humanity, with *sima* (linked to *simsim*, denoting darkness or spirit), which signals the supernatural. This morphological pairing produces a name that encapsulates duality and tension, reflecting cultural concerns surrounding taboo acts, abandonment, and the

permeability of the human–spirit divide. In this sense, *Anak Sima* embodies the moral consequences of transgression and the fragility of social and familial bonds.

Collectively, these three beings demonstrate how human-like naming operates within Banjarese linguistic anthropology. By invoking human referential frameworks, the names render the supernatural culturally intelligible, morally instructive, and socially resonant—bridging the gap between the seen and the unseen through familiar linguistic forms. The personal deictic dimension is reflected in three naming patterns: animal-based names, human-based names, and hybrid forms. These patterns demonstrate that supernatural beings are conceptualized through familiar semantic domains rooted in ecological experience and human morality. Animal-based names—such as *buhaya kuning*, *hantu macan*, and *hantu badak*—illustrate how environmental features shape supernatural imagination. These findings align with Duranti’s (1997) argument that lexical systems in traditional communities reflect ecological embodiment. Human-like names—*Kuyang*, *Mariyaban*, and *Anak Sima*—encode moral narratives regarding gender, transgression, wilderness, and social danger. These patterns reinforce Geertz’s (1973) assertion that language mediates moral representation.

Personal deixis encompasses animal-based names (e.g., *buhaya kuning*, *hantu macan*, *hantu badak*) and human-like names (e.g., *Kuyang*, *Mariyaban*, *Anak Sima*). Animal-based names reflect ecological embeddedness, drawing directly from riverine and forest environments and using fauna as symbols of power, danger, or sacredness. These patterns echo the ecological grounding of lexical categories observed in linguistic anthropology (Duranti, 1997; Wierzbicka, 1992).

Human-like names, by contrast, encode moral narratives and social regulation. *Kuyang* reinforces postpartum vigilance; *Mariyaban* warns against wilderness; and *Anak Sima* embodies taboo and liminality (Daud, 1997; Basrian et al., 2014). As recent studies confirm, such lexicons continue to frame identity, memory, and social behavior in contemporary Indonesian contexts (Mencej, 2021; Nasrullah, 2018; Sari, 2015). Viewed together, these naming conventions demonstrate how personal deixis functions as a cultural mechanism linking morality, identity, and ecological experience.

Spatial Dimension: Origin-Based Names

Some supernatural beings are named according to their origin of appearance, which reflects spatial cosmology. Their names often derive from powerful natural elements like fire and water, which serve as their sources. For instance, *Hantu Api* (Fire Spirit) and *Hantu Banyu* (Water Spirit).

The *hantu api* is believed to emerge from fire and is often associated with destructive conflagrations. Its form resembles the *Banaspati*, a flame-shaped,

fang-bearing being known in Indonesian folklore (PortalMadura.com, 2023). Eyewitness accounts, such as those from residents of Kuin Utara (Sekarini, 2025), reinforce contemporary belief in the entity. Frequent fires in South Kalimantan are often interpreted through the lens of *hantu api*. In response, communities perform *Maarak Kitab*, a ritual procession involving Quranic recitations and the carrying of the *Kitab Bukhari* manuscript to repel malevolent forces (Ideham, 2010). Holy water is subsequently sprinkled around homes to create a protective boundary. The naming of *hantu api* underscores how natural disasters are interpreted within spiritual cosmology and how ritual practices reinforce community solidarity.

Secondly is *Hantu Banyu*. In the Banjar language, *banyu* denotes river water, situating the *hantu banyu* firmly within the region's riverine identity. The spirit is believed to appear during *banyu pasang* (rising water), often signaled by whirlpools. Its form, compared with that of large aquatic animals such as cows or hippos, symbolizes strength and mystery. This myth explains natural phenomena while reinforcing ecological caution. Linguistically, *banyu* simultaneously refers to water and functions as a cultural symbol of purity, transition, and supernatural potency.

Spatial naming emerges clearly in *hantu api* and *hantu banyu*, both derived from powerful natural phenomena. Fire and water are conceptualized not only physically but cosmologically—as agents capable of harm, transformation, and spiritual significance. The *hantu api* reflects interpretations of disaster and the integration of Islamic ritual practice with local cosmology. Meanwhile, the *hantu banyu* reveals how rivers serve as both ecological and metaphysical landscapes. These interpretations support anthropological perspectives that understand space as an ontological and spiritual category rather than a purely geographical one. Spatially derived names, such as *hantu api* and *hantu banyu*, demonstrate how the Banjarese conceptualize natural forces as agentive beings. These N+N compounds index elemental origins and convert unpredictable environmental events into culturally interpretable categories (Husen et al., 1999; Wierzbicka, 1992). In this way, spatial naming links ecological experience with cosmological reasoning.

Ritual responses further illustrate this linkage. *Hantu api* is invoked to explain destructive fires and is countered through communal rites such as *Maarak Kitab*, which unites Islamic recitation with local protective traditions (Ideham, 2010; PortalMadura.com, 2023). Similarly, the naming of *hantu banyu* frames riverine hazards—whirlpools, rising water—within a spiritual landscape, reinforcing practical caution and ecological respect (Basrian et al., 2014; Iqra et al., 2025). These cases align with anthropological perspectives that view space as not merely geographic but cosmological and socially meaningful (Duranti, 1997; Palmer, 2015).

Overall, personal and spatial naming patterns reveal a coherent semiotic system through which the Banjarese interpret the unseen, regulate behavior, and

manage environmental risks. Future research may compare these naming strategies with those of neighboring groups or examine their transmission across generations to better understand how linguistic forms sustain cultural worldviews (Mualafina, 2013; Arslan et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the construction of supernatural naming in Banjarese society and demonstrated that these naming practices follow systematic linguistic and cultural principles rather than arbitrary assignment. Analysis of eight lexical items revealed two dominant deictic dimensions—personal and spatial—which serve as the primary frameworks for the linguistic encoding and cultural understanding of supernatural beings.

The personal dimension, expressed through animal-based, human-like, and hybrid naming patterns, shows that supernatural beings are grounded in familiar semantic domains derived from everyday experience. Animal-based names reflect ecological proximity and cosmological symbolism, while human-like names encode moral narratives, social anxieties, and culturally embedded notions of transgression. These patterns illustrate that linguistic forms operate as cultural mechanisms that mediate moral interpretation and reinforce social norms within the community.

The spatial dimension, evident in names associated with natural elements such as fire and water, further demonstrates how environmental features are endowed with agentive and supernatural qualities. Such naming practices indicate that spatial categories in Banjarese thought extend beyond physical geography to encompass cosmological, spiritual, and ontological meanings.

Taken together, the findings affirm that supernatural naming in Banjarese society constitutes a coherent semiotic system shaped by ecological knowledge, moral frameworks, and local cosmology. Supernatural names function not merely as lexical labels but as cultural constructs that articulate collective understandings of power, danger, and the human–nonhuman relationship. In doing so, this study contributes to broader discussions in linguistic anthropology about how language encodes cultural worldviews and shapes community perceptions of the unseen.

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