

THE ROLE OF *POPA* IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF THE DAYAK SIANG TRIBE

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Abstract *Popa is an integral part of the social and cultural life of the Dayak Siang tribe. Behind the activity of drinking popa, there are deep social and cultural values. Through a qualitative approach and anthropological perspective, this study comprehensively examines the role and meaning of popa in the life of the Dayak Siang tribe, while highlighting how this practice reflects the cultural dynamics, identity, and social structure of the community. The data in this study was obtained through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and literature studies. The results of this study show that popa is specifically categorized into four symbols that encompass the overall function and meaning of popa in the life of the Dayak Siang tribe. First, popa as a spiritual symbol that connects humans with ancestral spirits. Second, popa as a social symbol that strengthens community solidarity. Third, popa as a cultural symbol that preserves local identity and knowledge. Fourth, popa as a symbol of transition that marks spiritual and social changes in the life cycle of the Dayak Siang tribe. The cultural transformation of popa drinking reflects the dynamics of cultural adaptation to social, economic, and ideological influences that have developed over time.*

Keywords:

*Popa, Dayak siang tribe,
Drinking culture,
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1. Introduction

In general, there are two types of alcoholic beverages in various regions of Indonesia, ranging from modern industrial products such as Beer, Tequila, Wine, Whiskey, and Vodka, to culturally rooted alcoholic beverages such as *Saguer* and *Moke* in Papua; *Sopi* in Maluku and NTT; *Tuak* and *Peneraci* in NTT; *Cap Tikus* in North Sulawesi; *Baram*, *Tuak*, and *Arak* in Kalimantan; *Tuak*, *Arak*, and *Brem* in Bali; and *Lapen*, *Arak*, and *Ciu* on the island of Java (Heryana, 2022). Data shows that alcohol consumption in rural Indonesia is higher than in urban areas. In 2022, per capita consumption of alcoholic beverages in rural areas was recorded at 0.53 liters, while in urban areas it was only 0.18 liters.¹ The high consumption of alcohol in rural areas is closely related to the strong traditional cultural elements that are still ingrained. Rural communities tend

¹See Alcohol Consumption in Rural Indonesia Higher than in Urban Areas - halojatim.com.

to view alcohol not only as a beverage consumed for the sole purpose of getting drunk, but also as a beverage that has played a sacred role and held sacred value in the lives of indigenous peoples since ancient times, ranging from religious rituals, traditional customs, and symbols in everyday life (Serfiyani et al., 2020). From a cultural perspective, Koentjaraningrat emphasizes that eating and drinking have broad symbolic meanings. He states that: (1) eating and drinking are expressions of social bonds, (2) food is an expression of group solidarity, and (3) eating and drinking have symbolism in language (Koentjaraningrat, 2007).

The culture of drinking alcohol in Indonesia is essentially highly dependent on the local context and the value system embraced by a community. Mandelbaum, in his writing entitled "Alcohol and Culture", states that the meaning of what is called drinking and its relationship to other aspects of culture and society is usually more implicit (Mandelbaum, 1965). In this context, alcohol in one community may be sacred and important, but in another community it may be considered "haram" and prohibited. In certain areas such as Bali, Maluku, East Nusa Tenggara, and several other major cities, alcohol consumption is more acceptable, especially among tourists and non-Muslim communities. Restaurants, bars, and hotels often provide alcohol as part of their services. Meanwhile, in some circles, especially among the upper middle class, alcohol consumption can serve as a symbol of social status or part of a modern lifestyle. Activities such as wine tasting, cocktail parties, or business meetings in places that serve alcohol have become part of certain social norms. Alcohol has become a symbol of social attachment and a tool for negotiating cultural identity, which at the same time also becomes a space where the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are often blurred. The turmoil of globalization and modernization has slowly played a major role in shaping the way alcohol is accepted and consumed in society.

Alcohol in its traditional form, such as *popa*, is not just an intoxicating drink. It is an integral part of social and cultural life in many indigenous communities in Indonesia. Behind the seemingly simple act of drinking *popa* lie social and cultural values that have been passed down from generation to generation. For the Dayak Siang tribe, a sub-ethnic group of the Dayak people who inhabit the interior of Central Kalimantan, specifically in the Murung Raya Regency, the traditional alcohol they call *popa* is not only consumed for personal pleasure. For them, traditional alcohol has deep social, symbolic, and spiritual functions. This drink is often present in various contexts of time and place, from personal to communal, with various motivations and justifications such as religious rituals, traditional ceremonies, weddings, birthday celebrations, thanksgiving, and even mourning events. In the lives of the Dayak Siang tribe, the practice of drinking *popa* is not an individualistic act, but rather a collective act, a social act that reflects norms, power structures, and group solidarity. The activity of serving and sharing *popa* is one of the ways in which the Dayak Siang tribe builds a sense of togetherness, strengthens intergenerational relationships, and reinforces their social status in the traditional order.

Over the past decade, studies on alcohol have become an interesting phenomenon to examine, in terms of health, law, economics, social issues, and culture. Based on a review of the literature, studies related to alcohol have been discussed in various aspects, ranging from the definition and types of alcohol, the impact of alcohol consumption on health, to the factors that influence alcohol consumption behaviour (Adryani et al., 2025; Bagus et al., 2025; Nebraska et al., 2024; Lantyani et al., 2020; Latifah Mohd Noor et al., 2018). Several other studies also highlight the problem of alcohol addiction, its impact on mental health, and its role in accidents and crimes (Ramdini & Khadijah, 2025; Rausanfikra et al., 2024; Rohman et al., 2024; Putra, 2024; Pihahay & May, 2022). Overall, these studies focus more on health, legal, and criminal

aspects that occur in society. Meanwhile, studies that specifically discuss the underlying reasons behind the actions and behaviors of individuals and communities related to alcohol consumption have received less attention. Therefore, this study aims to provide a more open and comprehensive picture and understanding of the role of *popa* in community life, how it is interpreted in a ritual context, and how this practice reflects the cultural dynamics, identity, and social structure of the local Dayak Siang community, using an anthropological perspective. This study is based on the argument that alcohol should be understood not only from a medical or legal perspective, but also from an anthropological framework that appreciates its function as a cultural symbol, social glue, and expression of collective identity.

2. Method

This research is qualitative research conducted through ethnographic methods. In ethnographic research, field studies are crucial. Field studies emphasize empirical research, direct experience, and cultural immersion, which are characteristic of anthropological studies (Malinowski, 1978). This research was conducted in Tanah Siang District, Murung Raya Regency, Central Kalimantan Province. During the field study, data collection was carried out through several processes in line with ethnographic research methods, namely through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review. In order to obtain accurate data, the researcher conducted direct observation in the environment of the research group by living and staying with the research group for a period of two months from the beginning of May to the end of June 2025. This allowed the researcher to observe the culture without imposing their own social reality on it, especially to measure the difference between what people do and what they say they do (Sugiyanto & Winardi, 2019). Then, to gain access to the research group, the researcher was assisted by several fellow researchers who were part of the group.

In addition to being obtained through participant observation, the data in this study was also obtained through in-depth interviews with informants. In-depth interviews were chosen to obtain effective information about what informants believe, what their opinions are, and how this affects their lives. The interview system was carried out with each informant separately, using a semi-structured interview method that began with a series of questions, followed by flexibility on the part of the researcher in asking additional questions based on the responses of the interviewee. Therefore, in this case, the researcher tried as much as possible to create a relaxed interview atmosphere with flexible but specific questions in accordance with the informed consent that had been mutually agreed upon, with the hope that the informants would be more comfortable and at ease in sharing the information they wanted to share during the interview. The informants in this study were deliberately selected using the snowball sampling technique. This technique was used to select informants from one person to the next, based on their recommendations or social networks. In this study, one key informant was identified, namely the traditional leader of the Dayak Siang tribe, who then recommended other informants such as traditional leaders, village elders, and several members of the Dayak Siang tribe who were considered to have extensive knowledge and a good understanding of the research topic.

Data collection in this study was not only conducted through participant observation and in-depth interviews, but was also accompanied by a literature review in the form of examining books, journals, articles, theses, dissertations, research reports, and seminar papers related to the research topic. The literature review in this study aims to help researchers readjust their steps and perspectives so that the data collected is more comprehensive and free from the researchers' personal judgments. Furthermore, to analyze the data obtained, the researcher

used the data model analysis technique (Spradley, 2007), which is data analysis conducted during data collection and after data collection is completed within a certain period. Spradley's data model analysis collects a lot of data which will later be classified into several clusters, namely domain analysis, taxonomy analysis, and component analysis. In this study, the data analysis process began with classifying the data obtained from the field, then describing the data into concepts and theories used to explore various information about the role of *popa* in the life of the Dayak Siang tribe, how it is interpreted in the context of rituals, and how these practices reflect the cultural dynamics, identity, and social structure that exist in the local Dayak Siang community. After that, the classified data will be presented and reflected upon to be reinterpreted.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 General Description of the Life of the Dayak Siang Tribe in Murung Raya Regency

The Dayak are an ethnic group or multi-ethnic group that inhabits the interior of Kalimantan Island. The term 'Dayak' collectively refers to non-Muslim or non-Malay people who are generally the indigenous inhabitants of Kalimantan. The term 'Dayak' emerged in the late 19th century in the context of colonial rule, which took over the sovereignty of the tribes living in the interior of Kalimantan. The Dayak tribe is divided into 450 sub-tribes spread throughout the interior of Kalimantan (Maunati, 2003). Each Dayak sub-tribe has customs and culture that are in accordance with the social construction of the community, customs, culture, and language that are unique to each sub-tribe, both the Dayak in Indonesia and the Dayak in Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysia (Darmadi, 2016). The division of Dayak groups in Kalimantan based on similarities in customary law, language, death rites, river routes, and other criteria proves the existence of natural diversity and differences (AMZ, 2016). In Central Kalimantan, the Dayak tribe is divided into ten sub-tribes, consisting of the Ngaju, Ma'anyan, Lawangan, Dusun, Klementen, Kapuas, Witu, Katingan, Ot Danum, and Siang (Riwut, 2003). Of these ten sub-tribes, the Dayak Siang tribe is one of the sub-tribes spread along the Barito River Basin, particularly in the Murung Raya Regency.

Murung Raya Regency is one of the regencies located in the interior of Kalimantan Island, precisely in the northeastern part of Central Kalimantan Province and located in the Barito River Basin. Murung Raya Regency is the largest regency in Central Kalimantan Province. The area of Murung Raya Regency is approximately 23,700 km² which is divided into 10 sub-districts, 116 villages, and 9 urban villages. Astronomically, Murung Raya Regency is located between 113°12'40.98" to 115° 08' 6.52" E and -0° 51' 51.87" S -0° 47'25.24" N. Based on its geographical position, Murung Raya Regency is bordered by West Kalimantan and East Kalimantan Provinces to the north; Barito Utara Regency, Kapuas Regency, and Gunung Mas Regency to the south; East Kalimantan Province to the east; and Gunung Mas Regency and West Kalimantan Province to the west. One of the subdistricts in Murung Raya Regency is Tanah Siang Subdistrict. Tanah Siang Subdistrict is one of the subdistricts located quite close to Murung Raya Regency. The Tanah Siang Subdistrict has an area of approximately 123,900 hectares, which is 5.23% of the total area of Murung Raya Regency. The Tanah Siang Subdistrict is an area dominated by the Dayak Siang tribe, one of the indigenous sub-tribes of Murung Raya Regency. Based on the category of the area, the Dayak Siang tribe is divided into two large groups. The first group is called the *Siang Sondang* group, which is the Dayak Siang tribe who live in the mountainous plains in the Tanah Siang area around the Laung River and Babuat River. The second group is called the *Siang Murung* group, which is the Dayak Siang tribe who settle along the Barito River and Bomban River.

In general, the Dayak Siang tribe adheres to a communal kinship system based on extended families. Their traditional settlements tend to be scattered but organized according to custom. They live in a community that is interconnected through customs, ancestors, and the land. The social structure of the Siang Dayak tribe is hierarchical and collective, led by a traditional leader or *demang*. The customary system is divided based on the applicable kademangan (sub-district) area, where each kademangan is led by a traditional leader or *demang* along with several customary mantir (officials) who are spread across smaller areas within a kademangan. In the life of the Dayak Siang tribe, customary law still plays an important role in every decision-making process, conflict resolution, and the implementation of traditional ceremonies. Customary law regulates various aspects of community life, such as the distribution of land and natural resources, marriage, death ceremonies, and the implementation of religious rituals. Based on their economic system, the economic life of the Dayak Siang tribe largely depends on agriculture. The main occupations of the community are farmers and planters, with rubber as the main commodity and the majority of the workforce producing 3,078 tons in 2022. In addition to rubber, rice is also one of the main commodities with a fairly high level of production each year. The shifting cultivation system is one of the ways the community meets their family's rice supply for the coming year. In the lives of the Dayak Siang tribe, the cultural value of "*hokorohop*" or mutual cooperation is still very evident in every activity they do, whether during the farming season, harvest season, mourning, traditional ceremonies, or various celebrations.

Initially, the majority of the Dayak Siang tribe adhered to the beliefs of their ancestors, or what is now better known as Kaharingan Hinduism, which is a form of Hinduism practiced by followers of Dayak ethnicity in Central Kalimantan, formerly known as Kaharingan (Eka, 2022). Although the majority of the Dayak Siang tribe has embraced conventional religions, there are still several Kaharingan traditional rituals that are still maintained by most of the community. These beliefs are engraved in their daily lives. In the lives of the Dayak Siang tribe, every important activity related to nature and daily life is not only carried out practically but is also imbued with cultural and spiritual values. When they clear land for farming, build houses, or face disasters, their actions are not only seen as physical activities, but also have deep symbolic and spiritual meanings. Therefore, they refer to the rules inherited from their ancestors by performing traditional rituals. Some of the rituals that are still practiced today are the tiwah, totoh, balian, and bapura rituals. These rituals are a form of respect for their ancestors, nature, and the spirits they believe contribute to maintaining the balance of life. Through these traditional rituals, they ask for permission, protection, and blessings so that their activities run smoothly and do not cause spiritual or social disturbances. These customary rules have been passed down from generation to generation and have become part of the identity and character of the Dayak Siang tribe. For them, preserving and performing traditional rituals is a form of respect for traditions and local wisdom that have proven to be able to maintain harmony between humans and the environment.

3.2 The Function and Symbolic Meaning of *Popa* in the Life of the Dayak Siang Tribe

When entering the Dayak Siang tribe's village, the term *popa* often comes up in casual conversations among residents. This drink is not only part of their daily consumption, but also strongly attached to the social and cultural spaces of the community. In many interactions, *popa* is often mentioned, as if it were a cultural element that is inseparable from the daily life of the community. Although the term *popa* has long been known and used by the Dayak Siang tribe, none of the informants encountered were able to explain the literal meaning of the word. For them, *popa* is something that 'has always existed,' passed down from generation to generation

and accepted as part of their ancestral heritage without ever questioning its origins. In general, the Dayak Siang tribe recognizes three types of *popa*, distinguished by the manufacturing technique and ingredients used. The first type is *popa montowah*, a traditional alcoholic beverage made through a fermentation process using yeast, glutinous rice, *mohowang* fruit, *montowung utin*, and *doho* bark as the basic ingredients, without the addition of sugar, resulting in a higher pure alcohol content. The second type is called *anding*, which is an alcoholic beverage fermented from yeast and glutinous rice mixed with sugar water, resulting in a lower alcohol content. The third type is called *arak*, which is a traditional alcoholic beverage obtained from the distillation of *popa montowah* and *anding*, which tastes sour and is not suitable for consumption. However, for some communities, *arak* is not considered part of *popa* because its use is not tied to the local traditions of the Dayak Siang tribe.

Just as the origin of the name *popa* remains unclear, the history surrounding the origins of *popa* also leaves many unanswered questions. Almost all informants agree that *popa* was created by *Ranying Hatalla Langit*, the supreme God in the Kaharingan faith. One story that has been passed down from generation to generation among the Dayak Siang tribe mentions that *popa* originated from the dream of a powerful *basir* (female shaman) named *Basi Sauk*. It is said that, at an unspecified time, *Basi Sauk* experienced a state between life and death. She slept for three days and three nights, neither waking up nor dying. In this liminal state, she is believed to have received inspiration from *Ranying Hatalla Langit* about the secret ingredients and procedures for making *popa*. This inspiration was not just a recipe for an alcoholic drink, but a revelation intended to create *popa* as a medium connecting humans and ancestral spirits in traditional ceremonies and religious rituals. During the data collection process in the field, no other versions of the origin of *popa* were found, either through informant narratives or other oral sources. The story of *Basi Sauk* and the revelation from *Ranying Hatalla Langit* is the only narrative believed by the Dayak Siang tribe to be the origin of *popa*. This story is not only considered the most authentic version, but also has a deep spiritual meaning in the value structure and belief system of the local community.

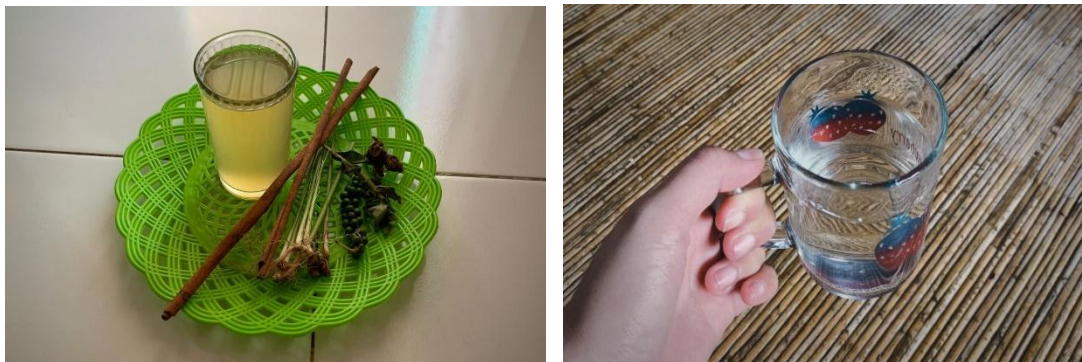


Figure 1. (Left) *Anding* Type *Popa* **Figure 2.** (Right) *Arak* Type *Popa*
Source: Personal Documentation

In the lives of the Dayak Siang tribe, *popa* is not merely understood as an intoxicating alcoholic beverage, but as an integral part of customs, traditions, and family values that are deeply rooted in the social life of the community. Based on the context of its use, *popa* consumption among the Dayak Siang tribe is categorized into two different realms. In the sacred realm, *popa* is consumed and used as a symbol of respect for ancestors and a tool for conveying prayers, similar to the use of wine in ancient Egyptian civilization, which was used as a medium

of communication between humans and the god Osiris, who was nicknamed the Wine God (Rachmawati et al., 2016). Meanwhile, in the profane realm, *popa* can be served in various situations, both in moments of happiness and sadness. In happy situations, *popa* becomes a symbol of joy, gratitude, and celebration of success or shared happiness. It is consumed as a means of strengthening social bonds at wedding celebrations, thanksgiving parties, and casual, unplanned family and neighborhood gatherings. The presence of *popa* in a profane context is closely related to its effect of making people feel more relaxed and confident when talking so it is often referred to as a mood-lightening drink. Conversely, in times of grief such as death or loss, *popa* is present as a symbol of respect, solidarity, and consolation. At this point, *popa* appears in various contexts of time and place, from personal to communal, with various motivations and justifications such as weddings, thanksgiving ceremonies, religious rituals, traditional ceremonies, and even death ceremonies.

“Popa is something valuable to the Dayak Siang tribe because it has a history closely linked to the beliefs of the Kaharingan Hindu community. The community believes that the presence of popa in every event held can make the targeted goals of the event achievable, but conversely, if there is no popa, the expected goals of the event will not be achieved.” (Interview with the Traditional Leader of Dayak Siang Tribe, 2025).

In general, the Dayak Siang tribe has various rituals that are performed to mark each stage of human life, such as birth, marriage, and death. In each of these rituals, the *popa* occupies a special position that connects the human world and the spiritual world. In the cosmological view of the Dayak Siang tribe, the human world cannot be separated from the spiritual world inhabited by ancestral spirits, guardians of nature, and other supernatural forces. Harmony between these three elements is believed to be the key to balance, fertility, and prosperity in society. Through certain rituals, *popa* is used to ask for safety, smoothness, and blessings from ancestral spirits so that the entire series of ceremonies can run well and bring blessings. For example, before clearing new land for farming, the Dayak Siang tribe usually offers *popa* as a form of offering and request for permission from the ancestral spirits. This is done to ask for protection, cleanse the ritual site, and honor the spirits of the ancestors or supernatural beings who guard the place. In religious rituals, *popa* also serves as a medium of communication with the spirit world. Usually, *popa* is consumed by traditional ceremony leaders or *basir* in certain rituals such as *balian*—a ritual for healing the sick—to open communication with the other world and obtain inspiration on how to heal the sick. In this ritual, the *basir*, who acts as an intermediary in the healing ritual, will consume *popa* to make it easier for the ancestral spirits to enter the body and take over their spiritual consciousness. This condition is better known as possession or trance. In this condition, the influence of *popa* will gradually reduce human control over their physical and mental functions, thereby lowering the frequency of normal human conditions. Therefore, when they find the same frequency as another world (dimension), humans can communicate with spirits from another world (Menot, 2022).

However, in religious rituals and traditional ceremonies, not all types of *popa* can be used. For sacred purposes, the Dayak Siang tribe only uses the highest quality *popa*, called pure *popa*. Pure *popa* is the first form of *popa montowah* and *anding* that has not been mixed with cave water. This type of *popa* is obtained from the essence of the first stage of yeast fermentation, which is still pure, resulting in a strong flavor with a higher alcohol content. The Dayak Siang tribe interprets pure *popa* as a symbol of respect and purity of human intentions in establishing a spiritual relationship with their ancestors. The sacredness attached to pure *popa* requires special

treatment at every stage of its use. Therefore, during the ritual, pure *popa* must be stored in a *balanga* or jar that cannot be opened carelessly. The *popa* can only be opened through certain traditional procedures led by a *basir*—a spiritual leader in the Kaharingan faith—who acts as a liaison between the human world and the spirits of the ancestors. In this procession, the *basir* will offer prayers and recite sacred readings to ask permission from the ancestors for the *popa* offering to be accepted. Through the chanting of *kandan*—sacred songs in the *Sangiang* language—the *basir* also asks for protection from the ancestral spirits so that the event can run safely and bring blessings to the entire community.

In various rituals and traditional ceremonies, pure *popa* has different names and functions, depending on the context and type of ritual being performed. In wedding ceremonies, pure *popa* is classified into two main types, namely *popa koruh* and *pinyan ponyuka*. *Popa koruh* is a *popa* that serves as an opening drink used to give advice, guidance, and marriage instructions to the bride and groom, which must be served until the event ends. In a spiritual context, *popa koruh* also serves as an offering to the spirits of ancestors who are believed to be present and bless the marriage. Usually, *popa koruh* is drunk by traditional leaders and family members who hold important positions in the social structure of the community. *Pinyan ponyuka* is a *popa* that is drunk alternately by the bride and groom during the fulfillment of customary marriage laws, which symbolizes the binding agreement between the bride and groom. In the beliefs of the Dayak Siang tribe, *popa* that is drunk from the same plate enters the bodies of the bride and groom as blood and flesh in one body, which makes the bride and groom love each other. The love referred to here is not only love for the good and bad qualities of each other, but also love for each other's parents, love for each other's brothers and sisters, and even love for the entire extended family of both parties.

Outside of the ritual context, the Dayak Siang tribe uses the *anding* type of *popa* as an effort to restore balance that is considered to have been disturbed due to conflict or violation of customs. In the view of the Dayak Siang tribe, conflict not only destroys relationships between people but also relationships with nature and ancestral spirits. Therefore, *popa* is used to cleanse and neutralize the situation so that the community can return to living in harmony. When there is a problem or conflict between members of the community, *popa* is presented as a traditional mediation tool, where the two parties in dispute are brought together before a traditional leader or village elder. In this context, the disputing parties will make a peace agreement that is ratified in accordance with customary law. After that, the disputing parties will drink *popa* from the same glass to conclude the traditional mediation process, signifying that the conflict has been resolved according to custom and cannot be prolonged. The Dayak Siang tribe believes that *popa* is an important social and spiritual mechanism for resolving community conflicts. *Popa* serves as a means of rebuilding trust and social harmony without the need to involve the state legal system.

In some traditional contexts, *popa* serves as a marker of a person's social status, age, and position. People who have the opportunity to speak in public, whether to express their opinions, views, or traditional advice, are those who have social status and position, such as sub-district heads, village heads, chiefs, traditional leaders (*demang*), *mantir adat*, and figures who have important positions in society. Before speaking, these figures are given *popa*, known as *popa mulut*. This *popa* is presented in a special container in the form of a buffalo horn, which symbolically represents honor. If a buffalo horn is not available, *popa* can be served in a large glass that must be filled to the brim and consumed in its entirety by the recipient. The community believes that giving *popa mulut* to speakers is intended to reduce any nervousness they may feel when speaking in public. However, many also interpret this tradition as an effort by the

community to build a warm and friendly social dynamic. Furthermore, those who do not have significant social status and position will be given *popa* called *popa pongoneh*. This *popa* is given in varying amounts according to each individual's ability. Some receive a full glass, some receive half a glass, and some only taste a little as a form of respect.



Figure 3. Traditional Leaders Drinking *Popa* from Buffalo Horns
Source: Personal Documentation

The discussion of the function and symbolic meaning of *popa* in the life of the Dayak Siang tribe highlights the role of *popa* as a complex cultural medium. From a material anthropology perspective, alcohol is a form of material culture that is deliberately created for consumption, but its consumption is transformative when it enters the human body (Dietler, 2006). Thus, alcohol not only has physical attachments, but also deep symbolic significance, particularly in marking identity, social differences, and individual self-construction. The psychotropic content in alcoholic beverages often provides high ritualistic value, even functioning as an important indexical sign in a ritual context. Therefore, the practice of alcohol consumption is usually regulated through a set of cultural norms and beliefs that are emotionally charged, transcending the value attached to the consumption of ordinary food and beverages. From a symbolic anthropological perspective, culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meaning, which is then implemented in symbols through an inherited system of concepts, revealed in symbolic forms that become a means for humans to convey, preserve, and develop knowledge about the attitudes of a community in symbolic form (Geertz, 1973). The use of *popa* in every traditional ritual of the Dayak Siang tribe can be seen as a symbol that represents the spiritual reality of the relationship between humans and their ancestors (mode of). At the same time, *popa* also represents the balanced relationship between the human world, the spirits of ancestors, and nature (mode for). In this context, *popa* is not only seen as a physical object or intoxicating drink, but also as a symbol that shapes and reflects how the Dayak Siang tribe constructs the meaning of life through ritual practices that appear simple but are full of cultural depth.

On the other hand, in cross-cultural studies, anthropologists emphasize that drinking is not merely consumption but an important tool in building and asserting identity and social status. Alcohol is often used as a symbol in efforts to create social structures or assert one's position in society. The construction and marking of identity through alcohol consumption occurs across various social categories and boundaries, including age, gender, class, family or descent, occupation, ethnicity, and religion. Regional, national, and cosmopolitan identities also often involve practices of alcohol consumption. The relationship between alcohol and identity can also shift over time, for example, in the context of increasing commodification where traditional

associations with age or seniority and community may be superseded by new associations with class differences (Dietler, 2006). In all these cases, Dietler explains that drinking serves simultaneously to build a sense of communal identity for those who drink together or to share a sense of difference and boundary with others. Therefore, in the context of the identity and social status of its drinkers, *popa* has become a means by which personal and group identities are actively constructed, lived, displayed, and changed according to their respective social categories.

3.3 Transformation and Reality of *Popa* Drinking Culture among the Dayak Siang Tribe

3.3.1 *Popa* Inside and Outside the Traditional Forum: Divided Sacredness

In the past, there was a culture of drinking *popa* among the Dayak Siang tribe called *ngorih dapot buso*, which is the culture of drinking *popa* until drunk. When drunk at traditional events, the community would dance *manasai*, sing, play musical instruments very merrily, and joke around. In this case, the moments of intoxication became the most joyful moments in a series of traditional events, because the sense of togetherness and intimacy that was formed was considered to be more pronounced. Even someone who is usually shy, when drunk, becomes expressive and does not hesitate to dance, sing, and laugh along with the entire community attending the event. Drunkenness in the context of traditional events is interpreted as a form of 'entertainment' aimed at relieving fatigue. According to them, one of the measures of a successful event is how heartily the guests eat during the event. If the guests eat heartily, it means that the food is delicious. In other words, if many of the guests are drunk from drinking too much *popa*, it means that the event can be considered a success.

"In the past, even if we drank during traditional ceremonies, we'd not last long. In other words, when we were heavily intoxicated, we'd immediately collapse and lie down where we were, then fall asleep at the venue. So we'd only wake up from our intoxication the next day. Therefore, our behavior while intoxicated didn't continue elsewhere" (Interview with Mr. YL, 2025).

Along with the development of the times and the increasing social complexity in traditional communities, there has been a significant shift in the pattern of participation in the cultural practice of drinking *popa*. Currently, some individuals who attend traditional events choose not to drink in the traditional context. They prefer to buy *popa* independently and drink around the event venue. Usually, they prefer to buy *popa* in small quantities and drink together in a gathering that is formed outside the traditional realm. This type of *popa* drinking culture often causes disturbances, because the behavior and amount of *popa* consumed tends to be uncontrolled. This has led to the use of *popa* in traditional events being stigmatized by various groups. At this point, there has been a change in the way people consume *popa*, from initially just to fulfill traditional requirements, to eventually consuming it for pleasure. This phenomenon also indicates the existence of a duality of cultural space in the culture of *popa* drinking, namely between the normative customary space and the more flexible alternative social space, where collective values are replaced by expressions of individual or non-formal group freedom. This transformation reflects how the practice of *popa* drinking has undergone a negotiation of meaning in the context of social change and modernity.

"Sometimes there are people who come to traditional events but just come, they don't drink in the context of tradition or at the place where the traditional event is taking place. They sometimes prefer to drink outside the event venue, for example on the side of the road, or in other houses around the event venue. In a sense, they drink *popa* but not within the traditional

forum. Usually, they will buy *popa* themselves, buying it retail. This is because when there is a traditional event, many people sell *popa*.” (Interview with the Traditional Leader of Dayak Siang Tribe, 2025).

The interview excerpt above explains that there is a clear difference between drinking *popa* within the traditional forum and drinking *popa* outside the traditional forum, which reflects a shift in the space of consumption in the culture of drinking *popa*, from a sacred cultural space to a profane social space. This behavior shows a form of profanation of cultural objects, where *popa*, which should be sacred, experiences a degradation of meaning due to shifting social practices. Profanation usually occurs in small religions or traditions that are closely related to negotiations over larger traditions surrounding them, which can take the form of the appropriation of rituals for a particular purpose (Scott, 1977). In Levi-Strauss’ structuralism, change can be seen in the structure of an object or activity. Change is not total, but a process of transformation (Yatno, 2020). According to Levi-Strauss, cultural elements are not only direct meanings, but part of a larger symbolic system, which can be rituals, norms, and myths that exist in society. On the surface, *popa* is seen as something that is presented in a traditional event or religious ritual which is then consumed communally. However, at a deeper level, the consumption of *popa* involves the opposition between humans and spirits, between life and death, between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and between the moral and the immoral. In this case, *popa* is seen as something that has a dual function, namely as a means of sacred religious practice and as a means of profane entertainment.

3.3.2 The Dynamics of *Popa* Production and Commercialization

In line with the times, economic demands have increased, and *popa* has begun to be traded as a commodity. Subrata states that commodification comes from the word commodity, and Marx defines it as everything that is produced and traded. Commodification is the process of turning something that was not previously a commodity into a commodity (Dewi, 2016). Commodification is the process of transforming something that was not previously a traded good or service into a product or service that can now be traded on the market (Sari, 2023). Historically, the Dayak Siang tribe produced *popa* using glutinous rice (known as *popa montowah* or *popa pulut*), which naturally produced high alcohol content. Changes in people’s preferences in producing *popa* gave rise to several types of modified *popa*, which are referred to as *anding* and *arak*. *Anding* and *arak* are called modified *popa* because they were created after *popa* became a tradable commodity. Both are modifications of *popa montowah*, which is the traditional type of alcohol of the Dayak Siang tribe. These modifications were made to reduce production costs, cut production time, and meet market demand. In addition, both are referred to as modified *popa* because in the production process, additional ingredients such as granulated sugar and sweet juice are used to avoid the use of glutinous rice, which is more expensive and difficult to obtain.

“Actually, the original *popa* of the Dayak Siang tribe is *popa montowah* or *popa pulut*, which does not use sugar. But *popa montowah* is rarely made because it is more expensive, requires glutinous rice, and glutinous rice is expensive and difficult to obtain, especially if we don't have a farm. Making *popa montowah* also takes a long time, up to one to two months. The yield is also not much. Therefore, *popa* makers began to modify each process of making the basic ingredients for *popa*. They use instant ingredients to speed up the process of making yeast. To avoid using sticky rice, which is quite expensive, they use granulated sugar. These modifications in the *popa*-making process have resulted in a new type of *popa* known to the community as *anding*. The production of *anding* is much faster, more massive, and more

abundant, making it more popular among the Dayak Siang tribe.” (Interview with Popa Maker, 2025).

This quote reveals the dynamics of change in traditional alcohol production practices among the Dayak Siang tribe, particularly regarding the differences between *popa montowah* (original *popa*) and *anding* (modified variant). *Popa montowah*, which is made from glutinous rice without added sugar, began to be abandoned because of its high production costs, the difficulty in obtaining raw materials, and the very long fermentation time. In response to these conditions, the community began to switch to the production of *anding*, a more efficient form of local innovation that uses sugar water as a substitute for glutinous rice. In addition to being cheaper, *anding* also produces a larger volume of production, making it more economically profitable. This quote also shows how *popa* makers, especially women, adapt their production techniques by considering the availability of ingredients, time, and production results. When the yeast quality is poor or the fermentation results are sour, they even distill it into *arak*, which has a higher selling value, even though the volume is small. This reflects the flexibility and creativity of producers in facing production constraints and their efforts to remain economically profitable. It illustrates the process of cultural and economic adaptation in the traditional alcohol production of the Dayak Siang tribe, which shows a shift from traditional values to practical and economic considerations in daily production practices.

On the other hand, this transformation is a reflection of the commodification of local culture, which was originally ritualistic but has now been adapted to become a market product. The community faces new economic realities, such as the difficulty of obtaining glutinous rice or high production costs, which have led them to choose to change traditional recipes to be more economical and efficient. In this case, we see the adaptive strategies of local communities, namely modifying ingredients and simplifying processes to meet market demands and maintain household economic sustainability. This shows how culture is not static, but rather constantly renegotiated in the face of economic pressures and modernization. Overall, cultural adaptation in modern life is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. This process reflects the interaction between tradition and innovation, local and global, as well as identity and change. In this context, it is important for each individual and community to find the right balance between preserving cultural heritage and opening up to new influences, in order to create a harmonious and sustainable society (Panjaitan & Albina, 2025).

In line with these descriptions, economic globalization has challenged cultural development in Indonesia. Economic globalization has triggered open and creative competition among cultural products (Irianto, 2016). The impact of economic globalization has also spread to various aspects of community life, including the existence of *popa*, which has long been considered a cultural identity for the Dayak Siang tribe. *Popa*, which has been a means of communication between humans and their ancestors as well as between humans themselves in traditional and social rituals, must now compete openly with other cultural products. In this case, *popa* has been turned into a cultural object produced by a community using home-industry methods for financial gain. This has given rise to the commodification of culture in the form of the sale and purchase of cultural objects such as *popa*. Through an industrial process that demands financial gain, *popa* has been packaged as a cultural object that must follow market rules. In the reality of the market, *popa* consumers prefer to consume *popa* for pleasure and to show off. When *popa* is consumed for pleasure and status, it undergoes a cultural transformation of meaning into an object of economic consumption and a social symbol that has the potential to shift the sacred and moral values of *popa* culture.

This change has significant socio-cultural implications. To achieve a state of intoxication equivalent to consuming *popa montowah*, a person must consume a much larger amount of *anding*, namely around one to two liters. Consequently, an intermediate state arises, in which the individual is semi-intoxicated, which psychologically and socially risks triggering impulsive, aggressive, or uncontrolled behavior. Thus, the shift from *popa montowah* to *anding* is not merely a change in raw materials and production methods, but also affects the structure of social experience and morality inherent in the *popa* drinking culture of the Dayak Siang. Maintaining social sustainability and preserving local culture amid cultural commodification faces major challenges, such as the potential loss of the deep meaning of rituals for the community (Lestari et al., 2022), the erosion of local cultural identity that allows local communities to lose control over how their culture is used (Hermayani et al., 2025), to the potential for spiritual aspects to no longer be understood or practiced as they once were (Ulum, 2020).

3.3.3 Culture of Friendship Versus Culture of Consumption

The culture of drinking *popa* in the Dayak Siang tribe generally takes place collectively. This indicates that *popa* has a strong social dimension in the structure of community life. In this case, society can be understood as a very large social network, namely a system of actors bound together by various types of social relationships that tend to coordinate their behavior. Where each actor is influenced by a small number of other actors, but is indirectly linked to a large number of other people (perhaps all members of the community). As a result, one can argue that each actor is directly or indirectly influenced by almost every other member of the culture (Raninen & Livingston, 2020). In this context, *popa* consumption is not carried out individually, but rather as a communal activity. Drinking *popa* is not merely a consumptive activity, but a form of participation in a social network that strengthens solidarity, togetherness, and collective identity. In the Dayak Siang community, *popa* consumption generally takes place outside the domestic sphere, such as in the courtyard of a house, a traditional hall, or other open spaces, and is carried out in the context of social interactions that can be formal (traditional rituals, religious celebrations) or informal (everyday socializing). In this case, *popa* is not only positioned as a material object, but as a relational medium that reproduces communal values and strengthens social cohesion in community life.

“... another problem is the habit of people drinking outside of traditional events. For example, I just came from a traditional event, in the sense that I actually participated in drinking at the forum. But when I left that area, or went home, on the way there was a high possibility that I would be asked to stop by by several families or acquaintances around the event venue to join them in drinking. This situation is difficult, even almost impossible for me to refuse, because it is at events like this that we can meet colleagues or distant family members, so like it or not, we have to stop by, and if we stop by, we will definitely be offered more *popa*.” (Interview with Mr. LS, 2025).

The point about “*not being able to refuse an invitation to drink when stopping by a family’s house*” highlights the tension between social ethics (hospitality) and self-control (health or prudence). This illustrates that drinking *popa* for the Dayak Siang tribe is not just consumption, but also a social ritual of meeting and respect between individuals. In Dayak Siang social ethics, offering food and *popa* to guests is a sign of respect and joy given by the Dayak Siang community to their guests. This is because it is embarrassing for the Dayak people if guests who come to visit are neglected, hungry, and not taken care of. Therefore, if guests eat and drink heartily, the host will be very happy because the dishes they have served are well received. In this case, the Dayak

Siang tribe treats guests as kings. The term king is only a metaphor to ensure that guests are treated as well as possible, like a king. When guests are given the title of king, it is hoped that they will establish good relations and return to visit the area. These good relations are symbolized by offering guests refreshments, such as cakes, betel nuts, gambier, tobacco, and areca nuts. By experiencing this banquet, it is hoped that guests will also feel the bitterness of life experienced by the community, so that later on, it will foster a sense of sympathy and empathy from guests to uphold mutual respect and appreciation for one another (Wiradharma et al., 2023). That is why, when guests come to visit, whether they are close friends or strangers, they will automatically invite the guests to eat together.

In the beliefs of the Siang Dayak tribe, refusing an invitation to eat can bring disaster. This is related to the community's belief in *pahuni*, or the prohibition of refusing food and drink offered by others. Among some Banjar communities, *pahuni* is considered a myth that is believed to be a sacred, generational belief that must not be violated, as it can bring bad luck (Harpriyanti & Komalasari, 2018). Therefore, refusing an offer of food or drink is quite difficult for the Dayak Siang community. According to one informant, there is a special technique that can be used to politely refuse an offer so as not to offend anyone. The way to refuse an offer of *popa*, whether in a traditional ceremony or not, is to first accept the glass or buffalo horn that is used as a container for the *popa*, then drink a little, and then share it with friends or other people around us, after first giving a prologue that can be understood by the person offering the *popa*. For example, "*Akuh mihi galas cotuh hia kawal kuh co poko bokena eh intoi*," which means "*I give this glass to my friend who looks the most handsome here*." In general, refusing an invitation to drink *popa* can be considered something negative. Thus, this places individuals in a dilemma between protecting themselves or maintaining social harmony. In anthropology, this reflects the ritual of reciprocity in which *popa* consumption becomes a medium for strengthening social relationships, but is risky if done without control.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that in the life of the Dayak tribe, *popa* is not only seen as a physical object or an intoxicating drink, but also as a symbol that shapes and reflects how the Dayak Siang tribe constructs the meaning of life through ritual practices that appear simple but are full of cultural depth. Specifically, *popa* is categorized into four symbols that encompass the overall function and meaning of *popa* in the lives of the Dayak Siang tribe. First, *popa* as a spiritual symbol, connecting humans with ancestral spirits; second, *popa* as a social symbol, strengthening community solidarity; third, *popa* as a cultural symbol, preserving local identity and knowledge; and fourth, *popa* as a symbol of transition, marking spiritual and social changes in the life cycle of the Dayak Siang community. On the other hand, the transformation in the culture of drinking *popa* among the Dayak Siang tribe reflects the dynamics of cultural adaptation to social, economic, and ideological influences that have developed over time. The practice of drinking *popa*, which was previously sacred and bound in the context of traditional rituals such as *tiwah* or *balian*, has now undergone a shift in both its symbolic meaning and consumption patterns. This change can be interpreted as a form of cultural transformation, in which the communal values and religious functions of *popa* have begun to shift towards more profane, flexible social practices oriented towards entertainment or individual consumption. Within the framework of cultural change theory, as proposed by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits, this phenomenon is part of a process of acculturation and reinterpretation of local values that occurs as a result of the interaction between traditional structures and modernity (Raudatul Zannah et al., 2024).

This study presents an important innovation in symbolic anthropology by showing that *popa*, as the traditional alcohol of the Dayak Siang tribe, does not merely function as an object of consumption, but also has a complex and multidimensional symbolic meaning. This approach is expected to enrich readers' understanding of how simple practices such as drinking traditional alcohol actually contain grand narratives about identity, solidarity, and social change. However, this study also has limitations in reaching a more in-depth ethnographic understanding of the complexity of contemporary practices, especially in terms of the interaction between the younger generation and traditional values, as well as the lack of exploration of gender dynamics, social class, and the influence of outside religions in reshaping the meaning of *popa* amid the current cultural transformation of the Dayak Siang tribe. Furthermore, this study does not include comparisons with other Dayak communities, which limits the generalization of the findings. Thus, although this study successfully explores the symbolic meaning of *popa* in depth, further interdisciplinary and contextual research is needed to understand the holistic cultural changes in traditional alcohol consumption in indigenous communities undergoing a shift in values.

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