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GHOSTS IN PONTIANAK MALAY BELIEFS: ORIGINS, TEACHINGS, AND EVOLVING FUNCTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of ghost beliefs in shaping the cultural identity of the Pontianak Malay community and to analyze how these beliefs have evolved over time. The authors argue that, despite increasing modernization, belief in ghosts remains an integral part of Pontianak's social and cultural fabric. These beliefs continue to serve as interpretive frameworks for phenomena beyond scientific explanation. The study uses a qualitative descriptive approach, selected for its ability to offer a deep understanding of complex phenomena, uncover the meanings behind data, and present a detailed view from the perspective of those involved. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 60 Pontianak Malays from all districts of the city, representing a broad range of ages, occupations, and social backgrounds. Source triangulation was employed by including diverse informants from different societal layers, while methodological triangulation was achieved through a mix of interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of social media. This triangulation aimed to improve the validity and reliability of the findings and to allow for multiple perspectives in interpreting the phenomenon. Results show that ghost beliefs in Pontianak serve not only as spiritual explanations for unexplained events but also as mechanisms for maintaining social order, providing entertainment, and reinforcing cultural identity. The functions of these beliefs have shifted under the influence of new media, which facilitates the widespread sharing of ghost stories, turning them into cultural commodities with economic value, especially in tourism. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, this study concludes that although the ways these beliefs are shared have changed, the core values embedded in the traditions and identity of the Pontianak Malay community remain strong. Ghost beliefs continue to connect the supernatural with daily life, adapting to modern times without losing their cultural significance.

KEYWORDS: Ghosts, Malay Pontianak, Belief, Origins, Evolving Functions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Amid the sweeping tide of urbanization and modernization that has shaped the city of Pontianak, belief in ghosts has not faded in fact, it persists with remarkable resilience. Classical sociological theories often associate modern cities with the decline of traditional beliefs and the rise of public rationality (Soekamto, 2009). However, the reality in Pontianak presents a stark contrast: belief in ghosts endures and has evolved into new forms. This paradox raises a fundamental question: how does a faith rooted in the invisible world survive and even thrive in a rapidly modernizing city?

In many beliefs and philosophies, there is a distinction between the tangible world and the unseen realm, which is invisible to the naked eye but believed to exist (Arafah *et al.*, 2020; Takwa *et al.*, 2025). This worldview holds that the supernatural realm, including spirits, gods, or other non-physical entities, is not separate from but rather intertwined with everyday life (Arafah *et al.*, 2023b; Halidin *et al.*, 2025).

In the daily life of the Pontianak Malay community, belief in ghosts is neither marginal nor exotic. It is not a mere cultural add-on but a central axis that shapes modes of thought, social behavior, and collective imagination. This belief has grown organically over time, transmitted orally across generations, interwoven into parental advice, and whispered through the long hours of night. Between the visible and the invisible, between what can be perceived and what remains unseen, lies a bridge of belief not easily dismantled by modernization or rationalism alone (Suprianto *et al.*, 2024). Belief in ghosts within society presents a compelling theme, as it reflects the complex relationship between supernatural phenomena and the socio-cultural structures of a community that frequently shape social norms, values, and behaviors (Takwa *et al.*, 2022; Nurcahyadi *et al.*, 2025).

In the local vernacular, the word hantu, often pronounced more deeply as antu, refers not only to a single supernatural being but to a wide range of entities beyond the reach of empirical observation. The term itself evokes both fear and faith. According to the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language, a hantu is an "evil spirit" believed to dwell in certain places (Tim Penyusun Kamus Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa, 1996). However, for the Pontianak Malays, ghosts are not always malevolent; they may frighten, warn, mislead, and protect. They symbolize boundaries between the human realm and that which lies beyond. Some cultures view ghosts as evil and

restless spirits, while others view them as benevolent entities that offer guidance or protection (Sunyoto *et al.*, 2022).

This phenomenon becomes particularly compelling when one observes how the functions of ghost beliefs have transformed over time. In the past, ghost stories were passed on orally in intimate social settings, often confined to specific neighborhoods or communities. Today, social media has become the primary medium for circulating ghost narratives, easily crossing geographic and social boundaries. What was once local folklore has now reached a broader audience, blurring the lines between myth and cultural commodity. This shift signals a move from traditional, one-way communication to interactive, user-generated content platforms (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, allow users to create, share, and consume content, thus fostering a dynamic environment for communication and information exchange (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a; Kaharuddin, 2024; Arafah *et al.*, 2025). Rather than disappearing, this belief system has adapted, becoming a form of entertainment, a mechanism of social regulation, and even a source of economic value through its tourism potential—primarily driven by technological advances in communication and information sharing (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023b; Arafah *et al.*, 2023b).

Within this context, the functional transformation of ghost belief demands critical analysis. Historically, ghosts were associated primarily with fear and responses to inexplicable events. In contemporary settings, however, ghosts often serve as cultural instruments that unify communities: entertaining, disciplining, or even offering social commentary. These beliefs undergo a process of transformation; they are not static and continue to adapt or evolve in response to changes in the surrounding environment (Arafah *et al.*, 2023b). These beliefs have morphed into a form of cultural resilience, preserving their essence amid the shifts of modern life.

Culture is never static. It continually moves, adapting and reshaping reality. It emerges from the dynamic interaction between humans and their environments, both physical and symbolic. Culture is not simply a response to biological or geographic pressures, but a means through which humans create social structures and build collective meaning (Mulyana & Rakhmat, 1996) a process in which culture shapes our thoughts, behaviours, and interactions (Takwa *et al.*, 2024, June), while at the

same time being shaped by collective actions, beliefs, and experiences (Takwa et al., 2024; Yudith et al., 2023). In this sense, culture is both a creation and a creator. Ghost beliefs among the Pontianak Malay community exemplify this dual function, offering a legitimate mirror through which the cultural dynamics of the society can be examined. Ghosts are not merely supernatural figures in folklore; they are symbolic mediums through which people articulate anxieties, values, and moral boundaries. This fact certainly provides a framework of shared values, morals, and practices, which in turn impacts social cohesion, moral guidance, and even cultural expression within a community (Baa et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2024, June). They constitute a cultural language—sometimes subtle, sometimes forceful—that consistently signals a distinct identity (Duile, 2020).

Moreover, one can observe how these beliefs undergo mixture and adaptation in everyday practice. This understanding involves examining how beliefs are practiced, the social structures that support them, and how they are passed down from generation to generation (Takwa et al., 2022b; Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Halil et al., 2024). Culture is no longer pure or preserved in its original form. What unfolds is a process of hybridization—a blending of traditional elements with modern influences that generates new cultural configurations (Burke, 2009). In this context, ghosts are products of a hybrid culture. They bear traces of the past while adapting to the present's images, narratives, and technologies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *The Origins of Belief in Ghosts*

Belief in ghosts and the supernatural is widespread across cultures and societies, influencing a range of domains, including traditional practices, social structures, and even mental health. This literature review synthesizes several studies examining the origins and epistemological foundations of ghost beliefs across the globe while highlighting the intersections between cultural narratives and communities' spiritual consciousness.

One prominent theme in the literature is the link between ghost beliefs and coping strategies for grief and loss. Popoola et al. demonstrate how supernatural beliefs, including ghosts, play a central role in the interpretation of stillbirths within Nigerian communities. Similar patterns have been observed in Pakistan and South Africa, where fetal deaths are often attributed to superstitions related to

ghostly entities (Popoola et al., 2022). Such beliefs typically arise from a complex synthesis of traditional knowledge and context-based interpretations of loss, suggesting that belief in ghosts serves as a cultural construct and a psychosocial mechanism for processing profound sorrow.

Beyond grief, the cultural significance of ghost belief is also evident in the context of rural tourism. Limwongse and colleagues explore how local communities leverage ghost narratives to promote economic development through tourism (Limwongse et al., 2024). Their findings reveal the dual function of ghost stories as instruments for constructing cultural identity and as catalysts for economic growth. In a different setting, Eyong et al. discuss the role of ghost belief in traditional political governance among the Banyang people of Cameroon, where supernatural entities serve to uphold social order and mediate conflict (Eyong et al., 2024). These anthropological insights underscore the social function of ghost beliefs, which extends far beyond superstition.

Geographically, manifestations and representations of ghosts are highly diverse. Eisenbruch illustrates the psychological impact of ghost-related fear among Cambodian garment workers, where Buddhist conceptions of spirits significantly influence perceptions of mental health (Eisenbruch, 2017). In many cultures, ghosts symbolize existential anxiety and collective fear, as reflected in the complex taxonomy of ghost types in Thai culture explored by Hengsuwan and Prasithrathsint (Hengsuwan & Prasithrathsint, 2014).

Historical contexts also play a pivotal role in shaping contemporary ghost beliefs. Edwards traces the evolution of ghost narratives in early modern Europe, showing how belief in ghosts mirrored cultural anxieties about death and the afterlife (Edwards, 2012). These historical trajectories indicate that ghosts have long served as cultural mirrors, reflecting a society's moral and social tensions. Similarly, Poo examines the connection between ghost beliefs and religious practices in ancient China, highlighting the role of supernatural entities in fostering social cohesion and spiritual reflection (Poo, 2022).

From a cognitive psychology perspective, Kéri argues that the human tendency to assign meaning to ambiguous experiences contributes to the persistence of spiritual concepts such as ghosts (Kéri, 2022). This view emphasizes the psychological dimension of ghost belief, where experiences of loss and existential anxiety often manifest as

supernatural narratives (Eyong *et al.*, 2024).

In many Indigenous cultures, belief in ghosts strengthens ancestral ties and reinforces collective memory. Hammonds shows that ghost stories often preserve historical truths that are frequently excluded from official narratives, thereby giving voice to marginalized perspectives within broader social discourse (Hammonds, 2025). These narratives challenge hegemonic histories and encourage community engagement through contemporary storytelling mediums, as demonstrated by Wannakit in his study of horror tales and mystical traditions in modern Thai society (Wannakit, 2024).

Beyond their cultural and psychological dimensions, ghost beliefs are also deeply connected to existential concerns. Barbastathis and Norenzayan, through their research, link supernatural entities to fundamental human anxieties, underscoring the importance of spiritual frameworks in navigating crises (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2016). The intersections of ghosts with narratives of loss, cultural expression, and social cohesion reveal the multilayered complexity of these belief systems across various cultural contexts.

Thieving in ghosts is not merely a vestige of folklore but an integral component of cultural identity, spiritual practice, and social organization worldwide. The studies reviewed here emphasize the need for anthropological, psychological, and historical approaches to fully understand ghost belief as a legitimate and significant object of scholarly inquiry.

2.2. The Intersection between Ghost Belief and Acquired Convictions

The intersection between ghost belief and acquired convictions represents a complex field of inquiry within both psychological and sociocultural frameworks. Once relegated to the realms of folklore and superstition, belief in ghosts has increasingly gained scholarly attention due to its capacity to reflect the evolution of contemporary societies and its accompanying psychological implications. This literature review synthesizes various studies that examine how such beliefs are formed, sustained, and transmitted across diverse contexts.

Research indicates that ghost belief possesses a significant gendered dimension. A study by Sharps and colleagues found that women consistently exhibit higher levels of belief in supernatural phenomena than men (Sharps *et al.*, 2006). This disparity is thought to stem from gender-specific

cognitive and social processing styles, with women tending to be more receptive to paranormal convictions. The cultural relativity of these beliefs is further illustrated by research conducted in Hong Kong, which demonstrates that ghost beliefs persist despite the dominance of rational, modern discourse (Esler, 2016).

The relationship between institutional religion and ghost belief also receives notable attention. Bader *et al.* argue that non-institutional supernatural beliefs increasingly fill the cultural void left by the declining authority of formal religious institutions, especially among younger generations (Bader *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, Langston and colleagues compared religious adherents with believers in paranormal phenomena. They found that both groups tend to adopt ghost beliefs either as a complement to or a substitute for traditional religious frameworks (Langston *et al.*, 2018).

Paranormal beliefs, including those in ghosts, are not merely remnants of superstition but can be understood through cognitive mechanisms. Aarnio and Lindeman emphasize that intuitive thinking plays a significant role in shaping beliefs in religion and the supernatural, challenging earlier assumptions that analytical reasoning alone underpins such convictions (Aarnio & Lindeman, 2007). Accordingly, belief in ghosts can be interpreted as an expression of an intuitive cognitive style, one not always governed by formal rationality.

A striking contemporary parallel to traditional ghost beliefs is the social phenomenon of ghosting—the abrupt termination of communication without explanation. Research shows that individuals who engage in ghosting behavior are often driven by so-called destiny beliefs, or fatalistic assumptions about interpersonal relationships (Freedman *et al.*, 2018; Powell *et al.*, 2021). These beliefs mirror the cognitive tendencies of ghost belief systems, where social interactions are interpreted through notions of fate or external forces.

Ghosting also produces notable psychological effects, including feelings of rejection and alienation emotional responses that parallel those evoked by traditional ghost narratives (Leckfor *et al.*, 2023; Navarro *et al.*, 2020). This suggests that the emotional dimension of ghost belief remains relevant in contemporary social behaviors.

Moreover, belief in ghosts has tangible implications for the tourism industry. Several studies have shown that interest in ghost-themed attractions shapes tourist behavior and preferences for supernatural experiences (LeFebvre *et al.*, 2019; Rittichainuwat, 2011). Rittichainuwat highlights the

ambivalence of ghost beliefs, which can serve as attractions and deterrents for tourists, depending on the cultural context. Such insights are critical for the development of ghost tourism that is culturally sensitive and locally grounded.

The practical application of ghost belief is also evident in community classification and development initiatives. A study by Limwongse and colleagues illustrates how traditional ghost narratives can strategically promote local economic development and cultural preservation (Lee, 2021). This demonstrates that ghost belief can function in community-based social development.

In conclusion, the existing literature indicates that ghost belief is deeply embedded in both individuals' psychological structures and society's broader cultural frameworks. These beliefs reflect social change and tools for constructing interpersonal relationships and shaping communal dynamics. Their ongoing evolution calls for multidisciplinary approaches to understand better their foundational role in contemporary social behavior and identity formation.

2.3. Transformations in the Function of Ghost Belief

The literature on the shifting functions of ghost belief reveals a complex landscape that encompasses cultural, psychological, and social dimensions. Ghost belief persists across societies, reflecting evolving attitudes toward the supernatural within modern contexts. This review synthesizes findings from multiple studies to elaborate on the dynamics of ghost belief and its implications in contemporary life.

Ghost belief is sustained across cultural contexts and rooted in significant psychological foundations. McGill (2022) observes that during the Scottish Enlightenment, a rationalist campaign emerged seeking to dissociate ghost experiences from religious frameworks. Nevertheless, many individuals maintained ghost beliefs as expressions of spirituality. This historical perspective indicates that ghost belief is not merely a vestige of superstition but is deeply embedded in cultural practice and the search for spiritual meaning. In line with this narrative, Bader et al. (2014) found that modern media representations of ghosts have contributed to a resurgence in public belief in the supernatural, signifying renewed cultural interest. This duality illustrates that ghost belief—though shifting from scientific discourse to the realm of popular culture—retains a psychological function by offering individuals a sense of security and

interpretative tools for confronting life's uncertainties (Bader et al., 2012).

Further, ghost belief significantly influences perceptions of mental health and individual coping strategies. Grover et al. (2012) report that a large proportion of patients diagnosed with schizophrenia in India profess beliefs in spirits, highlighting the interaction between supernatural beliefs and both mental structures and cultural frameworks. Exline et al. (2023) stress the necessity of cultural sensitivity in mental health care. According to their study, classifying supernatural experiences as pathological without accounting for cultural context may undermine therapeutic effectiveness. These findings underscore that ghost belief operates not only as a cultural narrative but also as an interpretive lens for existential threats, coping mechanisms, and psychological symptoms.

The function of ghost belief is also evident in the realms of tourism and community development. Limwongse et al. (2024) explore how traditional ghost narratives can be leveraged for culturally based tourism development. They propose that classifying communities through ghost-related storytelling has the potential to attract tourists and generate economic value from cultural heritage. Similarly, Singh et al. (2023) argue that public curiosity about the supernatural constitutes a cultural asset that can be optimized for local tourism while simultaneously strengthening community identity.

In addition, ghost belief demonstrably influences individual behavior. A study by Lin and Suárez (2020) shows that mental activation of supernatural agents can modulate moral behavior, suggesting that such beliefs may undergird specific social norms. The interaction between belief systems and ethical frameworks reveals that ghost belief is not merely passive but functional, shaping collective behavior and informing the moral ethos of a community.

These findings reveal that the transformation of ghost belief functions unfolds within a multidimensional space where history, psychology, culture, and tourism intersect. As societies renegotiate the boundaries between rationality and superstition, ghost belief may transform form, but it remains a vital element influencing human behavior and cultural expression. Future research must engage these dynamics more contextually, particularly in communities where ghost narratives are still integral to collective life.

Upon reviewing prior scholarship, it is evident that much of the existing research on ghost belief

concentrates on its role as a response to trauma, as a component of the cultural industries, or as an individualized form of spiritual expression. These studies often isolate the belief from the sociocultural landscapes in which it is embedded and evolves. This study offers a different approach. By situating ghost belief within the framework of cultural identity construction among the Malay community in Pontianak, it conceptualizes ghosts not merely as myth or symbol but as active spaces where collective memory, cultural imagination, and resistance to the pressures of modernity dynamically interact. Rather than treating ghost belief as a cultural anomaly, this research articulates it as part of a living value system that is continually reinterpreted through the everyday practices of Pontianak society.

The significance of this study lies in its effort to reconceptualize cultural preservation strategies moving beyond archival documentation or folklorization—by drawing directly from the lived values embedded within community belief systems. In the Malay Pontianak community context, ghost belief provides a meaningful entry point for understanding how people interpret space, time, and the social changes they experience. It is a shared narrative that shapes collective consciousness and cultural orientation toward the world. Thus, this study contributes to the deepening of local cultural anthropology and broader discourses on cultural preservation, offering a more contextual, and community centered perspective grounded in indigenous experience rather than imposed normative frameworks.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research began in 2005, driven by an enduring curiosity about the social and cultural dynamics of the Malay community in Pontianak, particularly regarding the role of supernatural elements embedded in their everyday lives. In this context, ghosts are not merely frightening figures but narrative structures embedded within the collective consciousness—a silent yet operative layer of culture. In its early phase, the study took the form of informal ethnographic observation: afternoon conversations with elders, stories passed down through whispers and proverbial advice, and direct observation in villages where myth and memory often intertwine.

A pivotal moment occurred in 2022 when preliminary findings were presented at a public discussion forum titled Ngopi Borneo, organized by the Community Engagement Institute at IAIN

Pontianak. The forum brought together scholars, cultural practitioners, and residents. The responses were appreciative and encouraged the formal academic development of the study, one that could meaningfully engage with the challenges of the digital age and shifting cultural identities.

From 2024 to 2025, the research evolved into a more mature scholarly manuscript, grounded in strengthened theoretical and methodological approaches. During this phase, Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* (1977) concept served as a central analytical framework, defined as a system of dispositions shaped by historical contexts yet adaptable to change. *Habitus* bridges the collective memory surrounding ghost belief and the dynamics of contemporary digital life. This study maps how beliefs in spirits, once confined to oral storytelling and communal rituals, have now migrated into algorithmic spaces such as social media transformed, yet still deeply rooted.

A qualitative research design was adopted, employing a descriptive technique (Creswell, 2014). Data analysis followed the interactive analysis model consisting of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Within this process, thematic coding was conducted systematically to identify narrative patterns concerning ghosts, the shifting meanings within supernatural discourse, and how discourses on fear, morality, and social order are transmitted or negotiated across generations.

To ensure the validity and depth of data, the study employed two forms of triangulation: source and methodological (Creswell, 2014). Source triangulation involved collecting information from a diverse range of informants—elderly and youth, from various socio-economic backgrounds, all of Malay ethnicity. Informants were drawn from every subdistrict of Pontianak City. This approach allowed the researcher to compare the narratives preserved in elders' memories with the reinterpretations by younger generations who engage with ghost stories via platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube.

Methodological triangulation, meanwhile, was achieved through a combination of in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and digital content analysis. This combination of techniques enabled the research to go beyond surface impressions and toward a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

This study was conducted with ethical approval and institutional support from the Malay Cultural

Customary Council (Majelis Adat Budaya Melayu) and IAIN Pontianak. A total of 60 informants actively participated in the data collection process, representing a range of professions and social statuses from village shamans, housewives, and street vendors to university students and online content creators.

Through the lens of habitus, this research demonstrates that ghost belief though evolving in form and modes of transmission remains a social practice embedded in cultural structures. What was once shrouded in fear has now transformed into symbolic capital a marker of cultural rootedness amid the currents of change. The ghost is no longer solely an object of fear; it has become a mirror of identity flexible, mobile, and persistently alive within the circuits of modernity in Pontianak.

By situating this local phenomenon within broader cultural and technological transformation frameworks, the study illustrates that tradition does not simply vanish under the weight of modern pressures. Instead, it transforms, sometimes resisting, compromising, and coexisting with the new. The ghost stories of Pontianak, ultimately, are not merely folklore. They serve as mirrors through which the community reads itself—haunted, yes, but enduring.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. *The Malays of Pontianak and Their Belief in Ghosts*

The word hantu pronounced antu by the Malay people of Pontianak whispers in the local consciousness, much like the wind rustling through banana leaves after rain. It is more than a word; it is a mirror of belief that grows, seeps in, and settles within the collective psyche of the Pontianak Malay community. It echoes in coffee shop conversations, bedtime stories from grandmothers, and the cautious steps taken through narrow alleys at nightfall. Hantu is not merely a remnant of old tales or an expression of primal fear it constitutes a cultural landscape that maintains the threshold between the visible and the unseen, the rational and the metaphysical.

Our research found that belief in ghosts is passed down almost like land inheritance: transmitted across generations not through scripture or formal doctrine, but through everyday experiences. No child grows up in Pontianak without hearing tales of the kuntilanak in the peat forests, the pocong at road junctions, or the river spirits haunting the Kapuas delta. While the manifestations of these spirits may change, their functions endure: to

explain the inexplicable, to soothe anxiety, and to instill ethical boundaries beyond formal religious instruction. These beliefs celebrate the unknown in a world increasingly dominated by rational certainty.

What is particularly striking about the belief in antu in Pontianak is its remarkable resilience in the face of modernity as the city expands with concrete and fiber optics, as surveillance cameras replace watchful neighbors, and as algorithms guide perception, belief in the supernatural remains quiet yet steadfast. It is not a vestige of the past, but a continuously renewed narrative—a whisper never fully uttered, and therefore never completely erased.

We recorded a brief yet poignant statement from a 53-year-old housewife. She spoke softly, as though negotiating with the wind: “At night, don’t say its name... or it will come.” This sounded like a prohibition, but it is a generational warning. Embedded in this utterance is a symbolic wall—an invisible barrier impervious to Western logic or modern pedagogy. Antu, in its elusive form, reaffirms boundaries of identity. It explains why, despite the rise of asphalt roads and 5G signals, the Malays of Pontianak still feel distinctly Malay.

A teenage informant recalled his childhood with a flat tone but eyes lit with joy, as if opening a forgotten book. He spoke of nights when his father told stories about babi ngepet a semi-spiritual, semi-criminal being that steals not with hands but by transforming into a pig. Then came tales of tuyul child-like spirits that steal coins from stingy rich people. These stories set his heart racing at bedtime and taught him moral distinctions between ownership and theft, between the lawful and the questionable.

There are also more domestic tales, intimately tied to the child’s body, such as that of the hantu hujan panas the ghost of unpredictable weather. This being is not meant to frighten, but to explain sudden fevers in children who play in erratic weather heat, rain, and heat again. While biomedicine might attribute this to viral infections or temperature shifts, in local oral tradition, it is a ghost. It does not reject scientific knowledge but fills the emotional gap when rational explanation fails to comfort a mother’s worry.

Belief in antu, therefore, is not mere folklore it is a way of life. It is not simply a matter of belief or disbelief, but a social mechanism for instilling caution, preserving collective memory, and delineating unspoken boundaries in everyday life. Antu functions as a symbolic language used when other forms of expression lose their magical resonance. It lives in pauses, narrow corridors, and

the stillness of midnight crossroads. Because of that, it never truly dies.

In Pontianak, ghosts are not merely supernatural beings—they are narratives. They live between words and fear, stories and faith, reality and symbol. In a rapidly moving world prone to forgetting, antu serves as an anchor, keeping society from being entirely swept away by modernity. There is a tacit acknowledgment in every whispered name left unspoken: not everything can be explained, and nothing invisible is non-existent.

Among the Pontianak Malays, ghosts are not merely objects of fear but also social instruments. They regulate curfews for children, demarcate moral boundaries, and even serve as media for discussing taboos. One community leader shared how tales of river-guarding spirits are used to warn youth against polluting waterways. In this way, antu serves as an ecological narrative, a localized ethics, and even a pedagogical strategy living traditions continually renewed.

There is a compelling paradox at work: modernization has not diminished belief in ghosts, but has in some ways made it more 'relevant.' In an age of misinformation and existential uncertainty, antu emerges not as a relic of the past but as a marker of cultural identity. It distinguishes Pontianak from other cities, and the Malays from different ethnic groups. The supernatural is not an escape from reality but an additional interpretive layer, granting deeper meaning to daily life. It offers

an alternative epistemology an equally valid form of knowing.

Within this framework, belief in ghosts cannot be dismissed as mere irrationality. It is a form of living cultural heritage, multilayered and functionally embedded in society. For the Pontianak Malays, antu is not simply an "evil spirit," as defined in the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia, but a means of resilience in a changing world. It is memory embodied in murmurs, midnight glances, and hesitant steps past certain places. Antu is the unseen part of ourselves—intangible, yet always present.

In the everyday life of the Pontianak Malay community, ghost belief is not merely a component of folklore but is deeply enmeshed in their social and cultural structures. This belief, passed down through generations, forms a bridge between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the transcendent (Suprianto *et al.*, 2024). Despite rapid advances in infrastructure and digital technologies, the supernatural continues to permeate daily experience. In their various forms, ghosts help explain what reason cannot, while reinforcing cultural identity as Pontianak Malays.

4.2. Types of Spirits in the Belief System of the Pontianak Malay Community

The Pontianak Malay community categorizes spirits into two significant types: malevolent (profane) and benevolent (sacred) spirits.

Table 1: Types of Ghosts in Pontianak Based on Their Classification.

| No | Profane | Sacred |
|----|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Kuntilanak | Orang Kebenaran |
| 2 | Penanggal | Penunggu Rumah |
| 3 | Tuyul | Hantu Laut |
| 4 | Babi Ngepet | |
| 5 | Hantu Hujan Panas | |
| 6 | Bangket | |
| 7 | Pocong | |
| 8 | Genderuwo | |
| 9 | Nek Grasi | |
| 10 | Puake | |

Source: Compiled from interviews with multiple informants.

Based on Table 1 above, spirits such as kuntilanak, penanggal, tuyul, babi ngepet, hantu hujan panas, bangket, pocong, genderuwo, and nek grasi are classified as profane or malevolent spirits. In contrast, orang kebenaran and penunggu rumah are considered sacred or benevolent spirits. These types of spirits may also be found in other regions beyond Pontianak, either under the same names or with different names that refer to similar entities.

This classification reflects the Pontianak Malay

community's worldview and interaction with the unseen realm. Belief in spirits is not merely myth or folklore but constitutes an integral part of their social and spiritual life. The categorization of spirits provides a structured understanding of their societal roles, whether as threats or protectors. This framework aligns with the typology proposed by Sims and Stephens (2011), who divide spirits into profane and sacred categories. Profane spirits are generally depicted as disturbing or harmful, while

sacred spirits tend to appear as benign or even helpful presences.

Among the malevolent spirits, the kuntilanak is arguably the most infamous. Described as a female vampire-like figure who sucks human blood, bites male genitalia, and even consumes unborn fetuses, her presence invokes deep-rooted fear. Certain rituals—such as hanging the head of a gabus fish or placing a kundur fruit—are believed to ward off her disturbance. Locals interpret the sounds of owls or chicks at night as signs of her presence. The kuntilanak has become so deeply embedded in Pontianak's identity that some oral traditions link the city's name to her (Duile, 2020; Syahzaman, 1994).

Another well-known profane spirit is the penanggal, depicted as a floating female head with trailing internal organs heart, liver, intestines—detached from her body. This spirit is analogous to the kuyang of South Kalimantan, lek of Bali, and krasue of Thailand. Penanggal is believed to feed on the blood of postpartum women and newborns. This belief exemplifies how the Pontianak Malay associate spiritual manifestations with natural or life-cycle events, reinforcing the perception of spirits as existential threats.

Tuyul also belongs to the profane category and is strongly associated with wealth-acquisition through occult means (pesugihan). Portrayed as a bald, child-like ghost, the tuyul is said to steal small denominations of money for its master, unlike babi ngepet, which can obtain large sums at once, tuyul acts selectively. It is believed that caretakers must offer breast milk to keep the tuyul effective. This belief reflects how supernatural beings are intertwined with material aspirations and unethical wealth in local cultural narratives.

The babi ngepet, another profane spirit, represents a human shapeshifter who performs theft in the form of a pig. The transformation involves occult rituals, such as lighting a candle to indicate the ongoing operation. Some informants claim that the babi ngepet only needs to brush against a house wall to extract money from inside. This belief system reflects the community's condemnation of wealth obtained through unnatural means, and positions spirits as active agents in these clandestine transactions. The hantu hujan panas is a spirit believed to cause sudden illness, especially among children playing outdoors during inconsistent weather. In Pontianak, children traditionally place blades of grass in their right ears to protect themselves. In nearby Sambas, a similar entity is known as hantu jaring. These spirits represent

localized understandings of health and danger, filling explanatory gaps left by modern medical frameworks. Bangket is considered a restless spirit associated with foul odors resembling rotting carcasses. Known locally as bangket menaon, this ghost is believed to appear with a putrid stench. It can be exorcised using traditional tools such as broomsticks and verbal curses. Such practices show how the community resists malevolent forces using culturally embedded methods. The pocong, while similar to bangket, is distinguished by its shrouded appearance, wrapped in a burial cloth (kain kafan). It is believed to be the ghost of someone whose worldly affairs remain unresolved. Thus, the pocong acts as a moral reminder of death and the need for spiritual readiness, reinforcing the connection between the afterlife and earthly conduct.

Genderuwo is a large, terrifying spirit said to dwell in forests or haunted places. It is commonly associated with sleep paralysis (ketindihan), during which a person feels immobilized or suffocated. Genderuwo is described as a green, monstrous figure. These beliefs illustrate the link between supernatural explanations and psychological or physiological phenomena.

Nek Grasi is depicted as an old woman who kidnaps children, resembling the archetype of Nenek Kebayan found in other parts of the Malay world. Used as a warning figure in oral tradition, she serves a moral function, deterring children from venturing out at night or straying too far from home.

Puake is a more ambiguous spirit, described variously as a giant serpent, a crocodile, or a floating log. Its form is flexible and often interpreted symbolically as a force of nature. Some believe that puake can be harnessed to control natural phenomena or to endow an individual with supernatural powers.

In sum, the classification of spirits in Pontianak Malay society reveals not only their metaphysical worldview but also their cultural mechanisms for coping with fear, maintaining social norms, and constructing moral order. The binary of sacred and profane spirits offers a symbolic framework through which people interpret the unseen, regulate behavior, and negotiate meaning in their everyday lives. These spiritual narratives thus represent a living tradition that continues to evolve alongside modernity while retaining deep-rooted cultural significance.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Malays of Pontianak and Their Beliefs

Scholarly investigations into the ethnic groups of

Kalimantan have been conducted by researchers such as Ave, Rousseau, and colonial officials like Hose, McDougall, Metcalf, Bock, and McDonald. However, most of these studies primarily focused on non-Malay communities, resulting in relatively limited data concerning the Malays of Pontianak (Bock, 1991; Hose, 1988; Hose *et al.*, 2003; MacDonald, 1985; Metcalf, 1982). Nevertheless, several notable studies have examined the Malays of Pontianak, including Harrison's foundational research on the Malays of Sarawak. In his work, *The Malays of South-West Sarawak before Malaysia: A Socio-Ecological Survey*, Harrison offers a comprehensive analysis of the coastal Malay economy and the community's resource utilization strategies (Harrison, 1970). Ave and King describe the Malays of Kalimantan as a heterogeneous population, generally categorized as Malay due to their use of the Malay language and adherence to Islam (Hermansyah, 2015). Many initially practiced local indigenous beliefs before converting to Islam, while others are descendants of intermarriages between indigenous groups and migrants from Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi. In daily life, the Malays typically work as petty traders, fishermen, rice farmers, and agricultural merchants (Avé *et al.*, 1986). Despite extensive research on various Kalimantan communities, studies on the Pontianak Malays remain limited, highlighting the need for deeper inquiry. The historical origins of Pontianak are closely tied to the establishment of the Pontianak Kingdom, which later evolved into the Pontianak Sultanate. This history began with the arrival of Sultan Syarif Abdurrahman Alkadri, the son of Habib Husin from Hadhramaut. Sultan Syarif Abdurrahman Alkadri became the founder and first ruler of the Pontianak Sultanate. According to Syahzaman, the name "Pontianak" was bestowed by the Sultan after he successfully drove away the kuntilanak ghosts that haunted the confluence of the Kapuas and Landak rivers. Following this victory, he established the Jami' Sultan Syarif Abdurrahman Mosque and named the settlement Pontianak, which means "dwelling of the kuntilanak" (Syahzaman, 1994). This origin story illustrates the deep interconnection between local supernatural beliefs and the formation of Pontianak as a city. Situated at the mouth of the Kapuas River, Pontianak is inhabited by a multicultural population including Malays, Bugis, Javanese, Madurese, Batak, Chinese, and Dayaks. This cultural diversity has fostered a unique social fabric wherein many ethnic groups adopt Malay cultural practices daily. For example, many Bugis residents identify as Malays in social

interactions, despite belonging to a distinct ethnic lineage. This phenomenon underscores the fluidity of ethnic identity in Pontianak, where Malay cultural influence is prominent across diverse communities. The heterogeneity of Pontianak's population is primarily shaped by its strategic geographical location along the Malacca Strait trade route, which connects China and India and served as a central hub for inter-island commerce. After Malacca's fall and Singapore's rise as a trading center, Pontianak emerged as a prime destination for merchants and migrants. These trade networks facilitated economic and logistical exchange and fostered intense cultural interaction. The resulting multiethnic environment—comprising Malays, Bugis, Chinese, and others—was fueled by the economic vitality and royal grandeur of the Pontianak Kingdom (Hasanudin & Kristanto, 2001). Thus, the region's historical ethnic encounters have laid a strong foundation for preserving cultural diversity. Despite time, the patterns of interethnic engagement—shaped by commerce, politics, and culture—have endured, positioning Pontianak as a thriving melting pot of social, cultural, and ethnic plurality (La Ode & Ismoyo, 1997). In Pontianak, kinship follows a bilateral or parental system that maintains balanced lineage ties between paternal and maternal lines. Fathers serve as the primary breadwinners in this family structure, while mothers manage household affairs. Extended families, including in-laws and siblings-in-law, commonly reside together. Children typically begin assisting their parents from age fifteen, reflecting a societal norm of early maturity. Furthermore, Malay social interactions are governed by a seniority system based on age, with elders receiving respect from younger individuals within and beyond the family unit. Pontianak's social fabric is also characterized by mutual assistance, especially during traditional events such as weddings, tahlilan (prayer gatherings), and religious ceremonies. Extended families frequently visit one another during Eid al-Fitr, with visits often extending throughout the month. This custom underscores the centrality of kinship and social cohesion in the lives of Pontianak Malays, where the tradition of visiting during Lebaran becomes a social obligation to maintain close family ties. Islam plays a central role in the daily lives of the Pontianak Malay community. Communal prayers in mosques and Qur'anic study sessions at local prayer houses (surau) are integral to religious practice. Religious instruction and Qur'anic recitation are introduced early, fostering a devout generation that upholds Islamic teachings.

However, despite the strong influence of Islam, remnants of pre-Islamic animistic and dynamistic beliefs persist—particularly in the enduring belief in ghosts and spirits. This illustrates a syncretic fusion between Islamic doctrine and indigenous belief systems, marking a distinctive feature of their social-religious identity. Belief in ghosts among the Pontianak Malays is not merely rooted in folklore but is intricately linked to their cultural identity. Figures such as the *kuntilanak* are associated with spiritual experiences and existential fears. These beliefs also reflect the community's interpretation of the supernatural and their means of coping with the uncertainties of life. Consequently, the Malays of Pontianak practice *serapah*, a form of mantra or incantation uttered in response to supernatural disturbances (Kurniawan, 2013). Despite the growing dominance of Islamic orthodoxy, such beliefs remain embedded in daily life, demonstrating an ongoing negotiation between local tradition and religious doctrine. The Pontianak Malays also exhibit a strong sense of cultural nationalism and attachment to indigeneity. Traditional beliefs rooted in animism and dynamism are preserved even amid modern technological advancements and global connectivity. This cultural loyalty is evident in religious practices and how the community navigates external cultural influences. It explains why many cultural values and traditions continue to be upheld despite increasing exposure to modernity. In conclusion, the Malays of Pontianak maintain a distinct cultural identity that integrates Islamic principles with longstanding local beliefs. Their enduring traditions, including ghost beliefs, form a living cultural heritage that evolves alongside socio-technological changes while shaping the collective identity of Pontianak society today.

5.2. Sources of Doctrine Shaping the Mindset of the Pontianak Malays

In the daily life of the Pontianak Malay community, the primary source of doctrine shaping their worldview and behavior is Islam, based on the Qur'an and Hadith. As with other Malay communities, Islam is the foundational framework governing all aspects of life, including religious practice, social conduct, and cultural expression. Religious scholars, regarded as authoritative figures, guide the community in interpreting sacred texts, offering counsel, and leading religious observances (Hermansyah, 2015). This religious framework significantly influences how the Pontianak Malays perceive and interact with the unseen world,

including their beliefs about ghosts, which are often associated with Islamic teachings on spirits and the afterlife as found in the Qur'an and Hadith. Like many Southeast Asian communities, the Pontianak Malays hold a strong belief in the existence of supernatural beings, including ghosts. This belief is evident in various aspects of their culture and daily life, such as folklore, spiritual practices, and inherited traditions. Their understanding of ghosts may be shaped by Islamic perspectives on *jinn* and *shayāṭīn* (devils), which are embedded in Islamic scripture and prophetic traditions. Several verses in the Qur'an and Hadith underscore the existence of these beings. For instance, Surah Al-Kahf (18:50) recounts Iblīs's refusal to prostrate before the Prophet Adam, indicating the reality of *jinn* and devils in the unseen world. Surah An-Nahl (16:17) and Surah Saba' (34:12–13) describe the interaction between Prophet Sulaymān and the *jinn*, suggesting that *jinn* are capable of communication and, under certain circumstances, may even manifest themselves to humans (Yayasan Penyelenggara Penerjemah/Pentafsir Al-Qur'an, 2019). Prophetic traditions (*hadīth*) further reinforce this view. Narrations in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* describe incidents where the Prophet Muḥammad cursed Iblīs or encountered groups of *jinn* seeking provisions. Such accounts affirm that *jinn* are not merely mythological but are considered part of the spiritual reality within Islamic cosmology (al-Bukhari, 1996; al-Hajjaj, 1988). Companions of the Prophet, including Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī and Ubayy ibn Ka'b, also reportedly experienced interactions with *jinn*, reinforcing the belief that humans can perceive these beings under specific conditions (al-Mubarakfuri, 2001). Grounded in these Islamic teachings, the Pontianak Malays long influenced by Islamic and local traditions tend to regard ghosts, commonly referenced in their culture, as real entities. Although the Qur'an explicitly states that humans cannot ordinarily perceive *jinn*, as noted in Surah Al-A'rāf (7:27), local interpretations often allow for the possibility of *jinn* appearing or interacting with humans in particular contexts (Yayasan Penyelenggara Penerjemah/Pentafsir Al-Qur'an, 2019). This may explain why the Pontianak Malays view ghosts as spiritual entities capable of interfering with daily life through mysterious presences or inexplicable phenomena. Nevertheless, Islamic teachings caution believers against fear of or reliance on these beings. While *jinn* are acknowledged as capable of possessing or disturbing humans as indicated in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:275) and narrations recorded by

Aḥmad—Islam directs believers to seek refuge solely in God. Verses such as Surah Al-A'rāf (7:200-201) and Al-Fuṣṣilat (41:36) emphasize divine protection against satanic harm (Yayasan Penyelenggara Penerjemah/Pentafsir Al-Qur'an, 2019). Despite this guidance, longstanding cultural beliefs among the Pontianak Malays reflect a nuanced synthesis between Islamic doctrine and local understandings of the supernatural, reinforcing the idea that such beings exist, even as Islamic principles warn against attributing excessive power or fear to them. In addition to Islamic teachings, local traditions also play a vital role in shaping the Pontianak Malays' views of the spiritual realm. Beliefs in ghosts and other supernatural entities, while not entirely congruent with orthodox Islam, continue to thrive as part of inherited cultural narratives. For example, belief in the *kuntilanak* a female ghost known to disturb the living is embedded in local folklore and often serves as a cautionary tale within the community. These beliefs represent elements of the Pontianak Malays' *habitus*, connecting their spiritual experiences with the unseen world, despite religious boundaries. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* (1977) posits that individuals and groups act according to long-established systems of disposition shaped by cumulative social and cultural experiences. This framework helps explain how the Pontianak Malays interpret and respond to supernatural phenomena. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is beneficial for analyzing how Islamic and indigenous belief systems interact in shaping the spiritual worldview of the Pontianak Malays. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* is a set of durable yet adaptable dispositions that structure perception, thought, and action in a given social context. In this regard, while the Pontianak Malays live in a modern environment, their *habitus* retains traditional values deeply intertwined with religious teachings. Their belief in ghosts, although challenged by modernization and technological influence, persists due to inherited social dispositions passed down across generations. In essence, their *habitus* fosters a mindset and behavioral pattern that blends religious orthodoxy with cultural tradition, producing a complex and interwoven belief system. This system allows the Pontianak Malays to interpret and adapt their understanding of the supernatural in a way that resonates with their evolving socio-cultural context.

5.3. Functions of Ghost Beliefs among the Pontianak Malay Community

Beliefs in ghosts among the Pontianak Malay

community are deeply embedded in their social and cultural environment. Prevailing norms and values, including beliefs in supernatural entities, influence every individual in this society. These beliefs have evolved as responses to the physical, biological, and socio-cultural conditions surrounding those (Ritzer & Goodman, 2005). Within this context, ghosts are not merely mythological figures or folkloric tales they function as interpretive tools for phenomena that defy scientific explanation. Passed down across generations, these beliefs have conditioned the community to accept ghosts as integral to their social existence (Mulyana & Rakhmat, 1996). In general, culture both shapes and is shaped by human activity, including beliefs in supernatural entities. Communities construct their cultural frameworks in response to environmental and social realities. In this sense, ghost beliefs serve as adaptive mechanisms that help maintain social and spiritual equilibrium. Ghosts are thus not simply mystical figures, but also cognitive devices that help people make sense of a world characterized by uncertainty and tension (Suprianto *et al.*, 2024). Through such beliefs, the Pontianak Malay community constructs meaning and value within their lived experience, expressed in narrative and ritual traditions. Joseph Campbell's theory of myth articulates several functions that also apply to ghost beliefs in the Pontianak Malay context (Campbell *et al.*, 2012). The first is the mystical function, where ghosts evoke a sense of awe toward divine power. The Pontianak Malays believe that God created not only visible beings but also invisible entities. The existence of ghosts, while terrifying, reveals the boundless power of God, who created both the seen and the unseen realms. This belief, in turn, deepens the community's spiritual conviction that everything exists by divine will. The second is the cosmological function, explaining that the universe comprises not only human, animal, and plant life but also unseen spiritual entities. Ghost beliefs provide a framework for understanding a metaphysical realm that parallels the physical world. For the Pontianak Malay community, this invisible realm plays a vital role, with ghosts believed to either maintain cosmic balance or symbolize unseen forces that influence daily life. Ghost beliefs also fulfill a vital social function, reinforcing and legitimizing social norms and order. For instance, a specific tree in the Saigon area of Pontianak is left untouched due to a widespread belief that a spirit inhabits it. This narrative serves to protect the tree, ensuring its preservation and continued role in the community's collective life. In this way, ghost beliefs

go beyond fear they support environmental conservation and uphold social-spiritual balance. Moreover, these beliefs serve a pedagogical function by transmitting moral and ethical values. Taboos such as urinating on trees, discarding menstrual products carelessly, or eating ritual offerings—are all connected to beliefs in spirits and supernatural beings. These prohibitions guide respectful behavior and encourage harmonious coexistence with the spiritual environment. In essence, ghost beliefs offer compelling reasons to uphold social and spiritual norms. In the modern era, ghost beliefs have also taken on an economic function. With the rise of digital technology and social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, these beliefs have transcended local boundaries to become commodifiable assets. What was once confined to the Pontianak community can now reach global audiences, attracting attention as fascinating narratives or entertainment. Through new media, ghost stories from Pontianak are packaged into videos, books, and merchandise, creating new economic opportunities. The commercialization of ghost beliefs has allowed the community to generate income via tourism and entertainment. Events such as ghost-themed tours or horror performances attract visitors and create jobs, transforming spiritual traditions into sources of economic empowerment. Additionally, social media has altered how the Pontianak Malay community consumes and disseminates ghost narratives. Platforms like YouTube have brought local stories to international audiences, transitioning these tales from local folklore into global commodities. This development offers the community avenues to commercialize their traditions and generate revenue through storytelling and supernatural experiences. Ghost beliefs have thus become not only markers of spiritual and cultural identity but also instruments of cultural diplomacy. Through digital platforms, the Pontianak community can repack their ghost narratives in appealing formats for global consumption. The speed and breadth of social media dissemination have transformed how these beliefs are perceived and utilized, demonstrating their multifaceted value as spiritual, social, and economic resources. In conclusion, ghost beliefs among the Pontianak Malay community serve diverse functions mystical, cosmological, social, pedagogical, and economic. These beliefs help the community interpret the spiritual world, regulate social behavior, and generate economic benefits in the digital age. Far from being relics of the past, they have adapted to modernity while preserving the

core of the community's cultural identity. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus can further analyze these ghost beliefs. Habitus is the internalized system of dispositions that shapes how individuals act, think, and perceive the world, influenced by their socio-cultural backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1977). In the Pontianak Malay, habitus reflects a worldview in which supernatural beings are not only spiritual agents but also structural components of social life. This habitus is formed through lived experiences, education, and inherited traditions (Bourdieu, 1977). For instance, ghost beliefs deeply rooted in Pontianak Malay culture are not viewed merely as mystical or supernatural but as vital elements that shape social and cultural values. This insight highlights how their social life is interwoven with metaphysical relationships, manifested through rituals, customs, and normative behavior. Through the lens of habitus, these beliefs inculcate values such as respect for nature, submission to unseen forces, and the importance of harmonious coexistence with the spiritual realm. Beliefs that spirits inhabit certain trees and must not be disturbed illustrate how habitus structures the community's interaction with its environment. Furthermore, this concept of habitus extends to how ghost beliefs function as social capital. Social capital refers to the networks and relationships that enable individuals to access social support and resources (Bourdieu, 1977). Ghost beliefs forge shared experiences and understandings of the supernatural, fostering community bonds and reinforcing collective spiritual and moral frameworks. In the digital era, social media and new technologies have reshaped the habitus of the Pontianak Malay community. Ghost beliefs, once restricted to local settings, now circulate widely through digital platforms, forming new expressions of social capital. These beliefs are no longer solely spiritual or social they have also become economic assets, generating benefits in the tourism and entertainment industries. Ultimately, ghost beliefs in the Pontianak Malay community represent manifestations of a culturally and socially embedded habitus. They express a unique understanding of the supernatural while reinforcing the community's social and economic fabric. These beliefs enable the Pontianak Malays to navigate modern transformations without losing cultural continuity.

6. CONCLUSION

The Pontianak Malay community's belief in ghosts plays a vital role in shaping its cultural identity. Despite growing exposure to

modernization and new technology, this belief remains a core part of their daily life. Ghosts are not just seen as scary supernatural beings but are viewed as symbols of larger spiritual forces that still affect the community's social, cultural, and spiritual aspects. This belief system provides a way for people to explain events beyond scientific explanation and to support long-standing, inherited values. The shifting functions of ghost belief further reflect the Pontianak community's capacity to adapt to changing times. Historically associated with fear and myth, such beliefs now also serve roles in entertainment and social regulation. Through social media and digital platforms, ghost stories are now accessible to global audiences, creating new economic opportunities in the tourism and entertainment sectors. Rather than simply preserving tradition, the people of Pontianak are actively repackaging it in modern and appealing formats for global consumption. Within this context, the belief in ghosts can be effectively analyzed using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1977). *Habitus*

reflects how a society's perception of the spiritual realm—shaped through tradition, education, and social experience— influences behavior and social interaction. In Pontianak, ghost beliefs function as spiritual explanations and social regulators that reinforce community norms. This is evident in rituals and customs, such as prohibitions against disturbing certain trees believed to be inhabited by spirits, which demonstrate how such beliefs structure social order. Overall, the belief in ghosts among the Pontianak Malay community is a vital medium connecting the supernatural with everyday life. While technology and modernity have introduced significant changes, the core of this belief system remains vibrant as a component of cultural identity. By integrating these traditions into the digital and global realms, the people of Pontianak have successfully merged heritage with innovation—transforming ghost belief from mere folklore into a cultural commodity that introduces their heritage to the wider world.

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