

The Meaning of Traditional Food in Building the Identity of the Banjar People

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Abstract

Modernization and changes in societal lifestyles have caused traditional cuisine to become increasingly marginalized and at risk of disappearing among younger generations. This study aims to analyze the meanings of traditional food in building the resilience of Banjar community identity. The research employs a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews using purposive sampling techniques, and visual documentation, which were then analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that Banjar traditional foods possess four dimensions of meaning that strengthen identity resilience: (1) symbolic meanings embedded in customary and religious rituals that reinforce spiritual and cultural values; (2) meanings as markers of identity and collective pride; (3) ecological meanings that reflect harmonious human–environment relations and local wisdom; and (4) meanings as a medium for intergenerational transmission of values and character education. The preservation of Banjar traditional food constitutes a cultural strategy for sustaining identity in the era of modernization, as well as a form of cultural capital for the development of sustainable gastronomic tourism.

Keywords: traditional food, identity preservation, Banjar community, symbolic meaning, local wisdom

Abstrak

Modernisasi dan perubahan pola hidup masyarakat telah menyebabkan kuliner tradisional mulai terpinggirkan dan berisiko hilang dari generasi muda. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis makna makanan tradisional dalam membangun ketahanan identitas masyarakat Banjar. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan etnografi. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan teknik purposive sampling, dan dokumentasi visual yang kemudian dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan makanan tradisional Banjar memiliki empat dimensi makna yang memperkuat ketahanan identitas: 1) makna simbolik dalam ritual adat dan keagamaan yang memperkuat nilai spiritual-budaya; 2) makna sebagai penanda identitas dan kebanggaan kolektif; 3) makna ekologis yang mencerminkan relasi harmonis manusia dan kearifan lokal; serta 4) makna sebagai media pewarisan nilai dan pendidikan karakter lintas generasi. Pelestarian makanan tradisional Banjar merupakan strategi kultural mempertahankan identitas di era modernisasi sekaligus modal budaya untuk pengembangan pariwisata gastronomi yang berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: makanan tradisional, ketahanan identitas, masyarakat Banjar, makna simbolik, kearifan lokal



INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as an archipelagic country with cultural diversity, has a wealth of traditional cuisine that is an integral part of its people's identity. Traditional food is not merely a means of fulfilling biological needs, but also a symbol of cultural identity embedded in the history, traditions, and values of the community (Harmayani et al., 2019). Each dish has a meaning related to traditional ceremonies, celebrations, and social activities. Preserving traditional foods means preserving cultural heritage and strengthening the resilience of a community's identity amid the tide of globalization. Traditional foods play a central role in shaping and maintaining local and national identities. Local traditions, local ingredients, and cultural values embedded in each dish create a bridge that connects communities with their cultural roots (Indriani, 2023). Traditional cuisine serves as an effective link in introducing culture to the world, while also being an important instrument in building identity resilience in the modern era.

The resilience of cultural identity, especially traditional cuisine, faces challenges. Technological developments and lifestyle changes have shifted consumption preferences from traditional foods to fast food (Ali, 2025). This is in line with research by Aprillia & Kusumandyoko (2021), which shows that 68.3% of young people in Surabaya prefer modern cuisine, while 31.7% are unaware of their traditional foods. This phenomenon can threaten cultural identity resilience, as the younger generation, who are the successors of culture, begin to disconnect from their traditional roots. Fast food is often perceived as a symbol of higher social status, causing traditional food to lose its prestige in the eyes of the younger generation. Without proper intervention, the resilience of cultural identity inherited through traditional cuisine will continue to weaken. Despite facing challenges, traditional food still has strong potential as a guardian of identity resilience. On the other hand, traditional food still has appeal and the potential to become the foundation of cultural identity resilience. Data from GoodStats shows that 71.4% of young people choose traditional cuisine as their favorite food (Naurah, 2022). This is in line with Populix research which shows that 44% of Gen Z likes traditional Indonesian cuisine, 7% Korean food, 6% Japanese, or 2% European (Purwanto, 2024).

In particular, the Banjar community in South Kalimantan has a unique and meaningful traditional culinary heritage that builds identity resilience. Banjar cuisine not only serves as a means of fulfilling food needs, but also as a reflection of culture, a marker of collective identity, and a medium for passing on noble values between generations. Various traditional Banjar dishes such as *Soto Banjar*, *Ketupat Kandangan*, *lakatan bahinti*, *wajik*, *bubur habang*, and white porridge, *kokoleh*, and various traditional snacks have deep symbolic meanings.

The provincial government, in this case the Governor of South Kalimantan, is committed to preserving traditional Banjar cuisine, where fish-based dishes are not only appetizing, but also hold deep historical and philosophical values about togetherness, local wisdom, and natural resource sustainability (Headlines, 2025). Banjar cuisine plays a role as ceremonial offerings and sacrifices in various traditions, which not only reflect communication with the unseen world but also reinforce social norms within the community. Traditional foods have symbolic meanings as a means of interacting with God (Milasari and Sudrajat, 2022), as markers of collective identity and pride, as cultural markers that distinguish the Banjar people from other ethnic groups, and ecological meanings that reflect the harmonious relationship between humans and wetlands. Collective pride in traditional cuisine strengthens the Banjar community's sense of belonging and social solidarity.

Banjar cuisine represents local wisdom in the sustainable use of natural resources (Leha, 2025). The use of local ingredients from the wetland ecosystem not only maintains the authenticity of the taste, but also preserves the ecological knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation. This ecological meaning strengthens the identity of the Banjar community as "wetland people". Furthermore,

Banjar cuisine is a medium for the inheritance of values and character education. This ecological meaning strengthens the identity of the Banjar community as "wetland people". Moreover, Banjar cuisine as a medium for the transmission of values and character education is embodied in the cultural values of Banjar cuisine, namely mutual cooperation, sharing, togetherness, respect for leaders, patience, social values, health, and self-esteem (Rahmawati et al., 2014).

Identity resilience through traditional food is also related to gastronomic tourism as an economic-cultural strategy. Gastronomic tourism based on local cuisine is a sustainable resource that not only provides economic benefits but also strengthens cultural identity (Atoche-Silva et al., 2024). Promoting traditional cuisine through social media can also increase community pride in cultural heritage (Widjanarko et al., 2024). However, traditional Banjar cuisine faces various threats, such as: a lack of regeneration of traditional culinary practitioners, unsystematic documentation, and excessive modification that eliminates authentic meaning (Pohan et al., 2024; Tirtana et al., 2025). In addition, the younger generation of Banjar, who are increasingly exposed to global culture, have the potential to lose a deep understanding of the meaning of traditional food.

Based on the above description, traditional Banjar cuisine plays an important role in building community identity resilience through various dimensions of meaning: symbolic-religious, collective identity, ecological, and value inheritance. However, modernization and changes in people's lifestyles pose challenges to understanding the meaning of traditional foods in building identity resilience. Therefore, research on the meaning of traditional foods in building the identity resilience of the Banjar community is highly relevant and urgent to provide a theoretical and practical basis for efforts to preserve cultural identity in the era of globalization. The problem statement in this study is how the meaning of traditional food plays a role in building the identity resilience of the Banjar community. Based on this problem statement the purpose of this study is to analyze the meaning of traditional foods in building the identity resilience of the Banjar community.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method with an ethnographic (Creswell, 2012) approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of traditional food in building the identity resilience of the Banjar community. The ethnographic approach was chosen because it can reveal the cultural values, practices, and meanings inherent in the daily lives of communities related to traditional cuisine. The research location was in Banjarmasin City, South Kalimantan, which was chosen as the cultural center of Banjar with its rich traditional cuisine. The research will be conducted over a period of four months from August to November 2025. There were nine research informants selected through *purposive sampling*, consisting of traditional culinary practitioners, Banjar cultural experts, community leaders, and community members who still practice culinary traditions in their daily lives.

Data was collected using three main techniques. First, participatory observation was conducted by observing the practices of making and serving traditional foods in various traditional and religious events. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the informants' understanding of the meaning of traditional foods. Third, visual documentation in the form of photos and videos was used to record traditional culinary practices. The collected data was analyzed thematically through the following steps: (1) transcription of interview data and field notes, (2) coding of data to identify main themes, (3) grouping of themes based on dimensions of meaning, and (4) interpretation of meaning in the context of the resilience of Banjar community identity. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods (Rifa'i, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, traditional Banjar food plays an important role in building community identity resilience through four dimensions, namely: symbolic meaning, as a marker of identity and a source of collective pride; ecological meaning; and an effective medium for the intergenerational transmission of noble values and character education. The details are explained as follows.

The Symbolic Meaning of Traditional Food in Traditional and Religious Rituals

The results of the study show that traditional Banjar food has deep symbolic meaning in various traditional and religious rituals of the community. Foods such as *lakatan bahinti*, *wajik*, *bubur habang* and *bubur putih*, *kokoleh*, and *ketupat* are not just dishes, but are a medium of spiritual and social communication that is laden with philosophical values. *Lakatan bahinti* (sticky rice) is understood as a symbol of social cohesion because its sticky nature is considered to represent brotherhood and togetherness in Banjar society. This finding is in line with the research by Hirzi et al. (2025), which reveals that ritual foods have an epistemological function as a means of cultural and spiritual transmission that reinforces local identity in the midst of globalization. In the context of Banjar society, every element in traditional food is a symbol of moral and social order that contains messages of togetherness, forgiveness, and hope for God's help.

The red and white porridge served at the ceremony symbolizes balance in life, harmony between joy and sorrow, and prayers for the safety of the family. The symbolism of the colors red and white reflects the duality of life that must be lived in balance. This finding is reinforced by Wachidah et al. (2025), who state that traditional foods are understood as cultural texts that contain symbolic messages about human relationships with God, fellow humans, and nature. In the Banjar tradition, red porridge and white porridge are not only philosophical representations of balance, but also prayers manifested in the form of food.

Furthermore, *ketupat* has a symbolic meaning as an acknowledgment of mistakes that have been made (Sriyana & Suprapti, 2024). The neatly woven shape of *ketupat* symbolizes purity and a return to human nature. Research conducted by Lindayani et al. (2024) on the symbolic meaning of food in religious rituals shows that dishes consisting of sweet and savory foods have an important social position in ritual events, such as traditional ceremonies, religious celebrations, or events that symbolize life transitions. In Banjar culture, *ketupat* is present in various rituals, ranging from the seven-month bathing ceremony, *baaruah* (commemorating the spirits), to family celebrations.

Rizqianah et al. (2021) in their research on the function of food in religious rituals emphasize that food can symbolically take on various complex meanings, not only as physical consumption but also as a cultural expression that reflects community identity. Traditional Banjar food in religious rituals serves as a medium to strengthen the spiritual and cultural values that form the foundation of community identity. Research conducted by Hidayat et al. (2025) in Ketapangkuning Village, Jombang, shows that traditional foods in *tingkeban* ceremonies reflect the values of harmony, balance, and respect for life. The same pattern is found in Banjar traditions, where traditional foods represent purity, the authenticity of human nature, and awareness of the origins of life. These symbolic meanings strengthen identity resilience by reminding the community of the noble values that must be preserved.

The Meaning of Traditional Food as a Marker of Identity and Collective Pride

Banjar traditional foods have become a strong cultural marker in building collective identity and community pride. Certain types of food, such as *Soto Banjar* and *Ketupat Kandangan*, have transcended their function of consumption to become symbols of regional identity that are not only known in South Kalimantan but also at the national level. This finding is in line with Iswari et al.'s (2025) research on edible identities, which

shows that food is used to create identity claims as cultural heritage. Food serves as a primary form of identity for some communities, not just as a complementary element. In the context of the Banjar community, traditional cuisine is a key marker of identity that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups in Kalimantan and Indonesia.

Research by Lin et al. (2021) using bibliometrics on gastronomy as a sign of identity and cultural heritage of tourist destinations shows that gastronomy is relevant to the culture and identity of a place. Gastronomy is not only about the food itself, but also about culinary traditions, eating rituals, and the social meanings attached to them. The rich culinary heritage of Banjar, such as *Soto Banjar*, *Ketupat Kandangan*, *Laksa Banjar*, and various traditional snacks, is a cultural asset that strengthens the collective identity and pride of the community. UNESCO's (2025) recognition of Italian cuisine as intangible cultural heritage provides a global perspective on the importance of cuisine as a pillar of culture, identity, memory, community, and social bonds. This recognition is not only about the dishes, but about *the "cultural and social blend of culinary traditions"* that form bonds, carry traditions, and connect generations. The same principle applies to Banjar cuisine, which serves as a bridge between generations and a social glue for the community. Research on *mapping identity dynamics in heritage tourism* conducted by Zhang and Mohamad (2025) reveals that cultural heritage plays a critical role in identity construction through three interrelated dynamics: temporal identity negotiation, spatial identity anchoring, and cultural identity hybridization. Traditional Banjar cuisine serves as an anchor of spatial identity that connects people to their place of origin, while also being a medium for temporal identity negotiation that bridges the past and the present.

Anwari (2023) states that traditional cuisine often has symbolic meanings that reflect the philosophy and values of the community that created it. In gastronomic studies, traditional food not only serves as physical consumption but also as a cultural expression that reflects the identity of a community (Juniarti, 2021). This culinary identity is reinforced through social and cultural practices that continue to be reproduced, such as eating rituals, feasts, and traditional celebrations that make food an important medium in unraveling the meaning structure and dynamics of community life. Sihalohe et al. (2023) emphasize that traditional foods are important in the transmission of cultural heritage and the strengthening of family ties. Dietary patterns and culinary practices reflect cultural and social backgrounds, serving as a powerful means of identity expression. In the context of Banjar society, traditional foods such as Soto Banjar are not merely soupy dishes, but symbols of identity that connect people to their cultural roots, creating a collective pride that strengthens identity resilience amid the tide of globalization.

Ecological Meaning: The Harmonious Relationship Between Humans and Wetlands

Banjar cuisine was born from the wetland ecosystem with main ingredients such as local rice (*Siam Unus*, *Mayang*, *Mutiara*), river fish (*haruan*, *patin*, *baung*), and various wetland plants. The use of these local ingredients not only maintains the authenticity of the taste but also represents ecological wisdom that has been passed down from generation to generation. Traditional foods are interpreted as a manifestation of the harmonious relationship between humans and the wetland environment that supports the lives of the Banjar people. Research shows that the Banjar people have deep ecological knowledge about natural conditions, including the ability to identify plants suitable for consumption from the wetland ecosystem. The use of *gumbili* shoots (cassava leaves), katu shoots, *tarung hintalu*, *papari*, *bilungka* (cucumber), and ferns such as paku lembiding as ingredients for *gangan* (vegetables) demonstrates sustainable ecological adaptation. Similarly, fish and aquatic biota, which are abundant in Kalimantan's waters, are used as a major source of protein.

These findings are in line with the concept of foodways, which emphasizes the complex relationship between food, culture, identity, economy, and the environment

(Lee, 2025). Foodways represent multifaceted ways of producing, distributing, consuming, and perceiving food that are shaped by and shape cultural and social norms. In Banjar society, foodways reflect a diverse cultural heritage and a unique wetland geographical landscape. The local wisdom of the Banjar people in environmental management is reflected in their pattern of utilizing natural resources in moderation, just enough to meet their needs. This principle of ecological sustainability can be seen in the example of the use of *tiwadak* (*cempedak*) bark, which is processed into *mandai*, demonstrating efforts to minimize waste and maximize the yield from available resources. Knowledge of *belaran* grass or paku lembiding as indicators of fertile soil for wetland agriculture demonstrates a deep understanding of the ecosystem. Research on the essence of paon (kitchen) in the Balinese Aga tradition shows that the domestic space for food processing can have symbolic meaning and spiritual dimensions that reflect the community's belief system (Agusintadewi, 2018). Although the cultural context is different, the same pattern is found in Banjar society, where the traditional food processing process is seen as a sacred activity, connecting humans with nature and the Almighty as the provider of sustenance.

The ecological meaning of Banjar cuisine reflects the harmonious reciprocal relationship between humans and the wetland environment. Wetlands are not only a source of food, but also part of the cultural identity of the Banjar community as "river people" or "swamp people." The preservation of traditional cuisine is thus an effort to preserve an identity that is tied to a specific ecosystem, as well as to preserve biodiversity and traditional ecological knowledge. A responsible ecological paradigm views nature not merely as an object to be exploited, but as a relative or a gift from God that must be respected and preserved. Nature sends messages and moral commands to be respected, including respecting life. This attitude underlies the orientation in consuming natural resources, emphasizing gratitude and responsibility as caliphs on earth. The choice of traditional food ingredients reflects the community's understanding of ecosystem balance and natural cycles, strengthening identity resilience through ecological awareness.

The Meaning of Intergenerational Value Transfer and Character Education

Banjar traditional foods serve as an effective medium for the inheritance of noble values and character education across generations. The process of making and consuming traditional foods, which involves family members, becomes an effective vehicle for character education. The results of the study show that the tradition of making *wajik* in Banjar families is not only a culinary activity but also a means of transferring the values of patience, cooperation, and gratitude. Children involved in the process of making *wajik* learn the value of patience because *wajik* takes a long time to cook. They also learn cooperation by taking turns stirring the dough, as well as gratitude for the ingredients available from nature. These findings are reinforced by Dameria & Bratanata's (2021) research on the spirituality of eating together, which shows that the symbolic meaning in the practice of eating together is acceptance and fellowship. Acceptance is defined as a space to recognize the equality of fellow human beings, which gives rise to a sense of solidarity, while fellowship provides a space to connect with one another. Eating together not only fulfills physical needs but also restores spiritual freshness, making it a spiritual medium for viewing other creations, including nature.

Research on food as a representation of social and cultural traditions shows that collective identity is strengthened through continuously reproduced social and cultural practices, such as eating rituals and feasts (Wachidah et al., 2025). In Banjar society, feasts or celebrations involving the serving of traditional foods become informal educational spaces where noble values are transmitted to the younger generation through direct participation. The literary gastronomy approach opens up a deeper reading space by interpreting food not only as a narrative element, but also as a cultural symbol, an expression of identity, and a representation of complex social values. Food

becomes an important medium in unraveling the structure of meaning, power relations, and the dynamics of community life (Wachidah et al., 2025). In the Banjar oral tradition, stories about traditional foods are passed down from generation to generation, carrying moral lessons and cultural values that strengthen identity resilience.

The practice of passing on values through traditional foods is in line with the concept of cultural heritage transmission, which emphasizes the importance of involving younger generations in cultural practices directly. Observation and participation in making traditional foods are more effective methods of instilling character values than formal learning. Wachidah et al. (2025) show that culinary story-based literacy activities can accommodate children's diverse learning styles through linguistic, kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and naturalistic aspects, making traditional foods not only a tool for cultural preservation but also a learning strategy oriented towards diversity of potential. The stories and philosophies told by the older generation while making food instill the values of loving knowledge and respecting tradition. The reinforcement of social norms through traditional foods is evident in the presence of certain foods that are mandatory in traditional rituals, strengthening compliance with prevailing social rules and cultural norms. This makes traditional foods a rich cultural medium, where through taste, aroma, the cooking process, and the ritual of serving, the Banjar people consciously and creatively preserve their cultural roots and pass on the core values that strengthen their intergenerational identity.

The four dimensions of traditional food meaning that have been described—symbolic-religious, collective identity, ecological, and value inheritance—are interrelated and reinforce each other in building the cultural identity resilience of the Banjar people. This identity resilience is very important amid the currents of modernization and globalization that threaten the existence of traditional cuisine. Research shows that despite facing the challenges of modernization, traditional Indonesian food still holds strong appeal among the younger generation. Data shows that 44% of Gen Z admit to liking pure Indonesian cuisine, higher than Korean (7%), Japanese (6%), or European (2%) food (Purwanto, 2024). This indicates that the foundation of identity resilience through traditional cuisine is still strong and has the potential to be further strengthened. However, challenges remain. The lack of regeneration of traditional culinary practitioners, unsystematic documentation, and excessive modifications that eliminate authentic meaning can weaken the function of traditional food as a guardian of identity resilience. Therefore, a deep understanding of the meanings contained in traditional Banjar food is very important as a basis for designing effective preservation strategies.

The preservation of traditional Banjar cuisine is not only important from a cultural perspective, but also has economic value through the development of gastronomic tourism. Thus, the meaning of traditional food in building the identity resilience of the Banjar people encompasses spiritual (through religious rituals), social (through collective identity), ecological (through relations with nature), and pedagogical (through the inheritance of values) dimensions. These four dimensions make traditional food a holistic instrument in preserving the cultural identity of the Banjar community in the era of globalization, while also serving as cultural capital that can be developed for the economic well-being of the community without sacrificing the values of cultural authenticity.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that traditional foods play an important role in building the resilience of the Banjar community's identity through four mutually reinforcing dimensions of meaning. First, the symbolic meaning in traditional and religious rituals strengthens spiritual and cultural values. Second, traditional foods serve as markers of identity and sources of collective pride that distinguish the Banjar community from other ethnic groups. Third, ecological meaning reflects the harmonious relationship between

humans and the wetland environment as well as local wisdom in the sustainable use of natural resources. Fourth, traditional foods are an effective medium for passing on noble values and character education across generations.

The implications of this study indicate the importance of a holistic strategy for preserving traditional cuisine, focusing not only on recipes and cooking techniques, but also on a deep understanding of the meanings contained within them. The preservation of traditional Banjar cuisine is a cultural strategy for maintaining identity in the era of modernization, as well as cultural capital for the development of sustainable gastronomic tourism. Further research is recommended to examine the dynamics of adaptation of traditional Banjar cuisine among the younger generation, strategies for digitizing culinary documentation as a preservation effort, and the potential for creative economy based on traditional cuisine. Comparative studies with other wetland communities in Indonesia are also promising to enrich our understanding of the relationship between ecology, cuisine, and cultural identity.

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