



## SUNDANESE TABOO WORDS AVOIDANCE SHAPED BY MYTHS IN BATU GARA

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### Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis strategi penghindaran kata tabu di Desa Batu Gara, Sumedang, melalui teori semiotika Roland Barthes tentang mitos. Desain penelitian kualitatif diterapkan dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipan, dan analisis dokumen terhadap lima informan kunci dan enam warga. Temuan penelitian mengungkap bahwa mitos yang melekat pada kata tabu seperti *Maung* (harimau) dan *Péot* (kurus) secara langsung membentuk strategi penghindaran komunitas. Keyakinan akan konsekuensi gaib (hujan, petir) menaturalisasikan mitos, sementara normalisasi sejarah melalui tradisi dari generasi ke generasi mengosongkan realitas dari konteks historisnya. Strategi penghindaran utama berupa substitusi leksikal (e.g., *Kerud* untuk *Maung*) berfungsi sebagai eks-nominasi Barthesian untuk menetralisir sejarah yang berbahaya, sedangkan ritual kesantunan (*punten*) memperkuat otoritas mitos. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penghindaran kata tabu bukan sekadar larangan linguistik, tetapi merupakan performativitas semiotik yang mengabadikan ideologi dan tatanan sosial tradisional.

**Kata kunci:**Kata Tabu, Mitos, Roland Barthes, Semiotika, Strategi Penghindaran.

### Abstract

This research analyzes the avoidance strategies of taboo words in Batu Gara Village, Sumedang, through Roland Barthes' semiotic theory of myth. A qualitative design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving five key informants and six villagers. The findings reveal that the myths embedded in taboo words such as *Maung* (tiger) and *Péot* (skinny) directly shape the community's avoidance strategies. The belief in supernatural consequences (rain, lightning) naturalizes the myth, while historical normalization through generational transmission empties the reality of its history. The primary avoidance strategy of lexical substitution (e.g., *Kerud* for *Maung*) functions as a Barthesian ex-nomination to neutralize dangerous histories, while politeness rituals (*punten*) reinforce the myth's authority. This research concludes that taboo word avoidance is not merely a linguistic prohibition but a semiotic performativity that perpetuates traditional ideology and social order.

**Keywords:** Taboo Words, Myth, Roland Barthes, Semiotics, Avoidance Strategy

## INTRODUCTION

Sumedang, designated as the *Puseur Budaya Sunda* (Center of Sundanese Culture) through Regional Regulation Number 1 of 2020, recognizes language as a vital element of



cultural development. In this context, linguistic practices like *pamali* (taboo words) hold a significant position as markers of cultural identity. Batu Gara Village, with its history as *Batur Nagara* (Pillar of the Kingdom) of Sumedang Larang, is a perfect site for examining this phenomenon due to its community's strong adherence to ancestral traditions.

According to Kripsiyadi (2017), *pamali* is a form of cultural wisdom where elders advise against certain actions to prevent negative consequences. This concept is deeply connected to the law of cause and effect. These warnings are often structured as a clear if-then statement in the Sundanese language. They typically start with a command like don't do this, followed by words like *matak* or *bisi* (which mean later or could be) to introduce the potential undesirable outcome (Arif and Listiana, 2023). As Sarmidi (2015) notes, these taboos, expressed through specific words or patterned sentences, originate from community experiences. Some have logical explanations that are easily accepted, while others are simply taken on faith, having been passed down through generations as ingrained beliefs without a clear, rational basis.

Batu Gara Village in Sumedang remains a place where the use of taboo words persists. The community's efforts to avoid such words indicate their strong attachment to local culture and long-held traditions. However, the myths surrounding these taboos remain largely unexplored. Semiotics has become an interdisciplinary field, applied in linguistics, literature, media studies, anthropology, and more, to analyze how meaning is constructed and interpreted in different cultural contexts.

Saussure (1916) explained that semiotics is the study of signs and sign-using behavior. It examines how meaning is created and communicated through signs, which can include words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. Semiotics, or semiology defined as the study of the life of signs within society. This study employs Barthes' theory, which provides a relevant lens for analyzing this phenomenon. Barthes (1972) describes how a symbol (in this case, a word) has deeper cultural and ideological implications (connotation). Additionally, myth theory supports comprehending ideology from the society that becomes naturalized and accepts these meanings as true (Jadou & Ghabra, 2021). Barthes' analysis of myth is foundational in cultural studies, as it reveals how language, images, and symbols are used to continue social norms and power structures. Interpreting myths, examining how meaning is constructed, and questioning through the motivations and interests behind it.

According to Barthes (1972), the primary function of myth is naturalization, a process that transforms historical and social constructs into universal, timeless truths, thereby obscuring their origins in human action and power relations. This is often achieved and preserved through generational transmission, where beliefs are passed down as tradition, effectively emptying reality of its history and making contingent ideologies appear as objective common sense. A key strategy in this process is ex-nomination, which avoids naming the underlying ideologies by replacing specific terms with universal language or synonyms, a practice sometimes rooted in cultural taboos.

Zuindra et al. (2021) find eighteen different taboo terms that are prohibited in Karang Sari village, North Sumatra. On the other hand, Yunanda et al. (2022) examined a comparison using Lado's theory of five types of taboo words in English and Minangkabau, Sumatra Barat. Batistella's theory in Alhakimi et al. (2024) explained that the people of Muncan Village believe in fifty-seven forbidden expressions. Furthermore, Irwan et al. (2021) discussed the translation of unacceptable terms and Karjalainen's theory for the psychological and social motives in the Get Hard film. In contrast, Kaili Language Perspective from Martina and Lubis



(2022) explores swear words within the Malay language of West Kalimantan. The previous research provides valuable insights into the sociolinguistic approach, anthropological context, and cultural beliefs of taboo words in the article; there was a gap in the application of semiotic analysis, specifically through the lens of Roland Barthes. Therefore, this study aims to fundamentally analyze how the myth influences the avoidance strategies of the taboo words in the Batu Gara Village community.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative design with an interpretive phenomenological approach to investigate the community's lived experiences of the *pamali* tradition. This approach is combined with Barthesian (1972) semiotic analysis to break down the linguistic signs of taboo words as a system of myths. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, divided into two groups: (1) five key persons (customary leaders, guardians of sacred sites, respected elders) with deep knowledge of local history and myths; and (2) six general villagers to understand contemporary practices and perceptions. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions about experiences, beliefs, and strategies for avoiding taboo words; participant observation to record real-time avoidance practices; and document analysis of the Babad Sumedang chronicles and local historical sources to trace the historical roots of the myths. Data validity was ensured through data source triangulation (interviews, observation, and documents) and member checking with key persons to ensure interpretive accuracy. Data analysis followed Bingham's (2023) five-phase model, with deductive coding based on Barthes' concepts (myth, naturalization, ex-nomination) and inductive coding for avoidance themes emerging from the data.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### FINDINGS

The findings reveal that the power of the *pamali* (taboo) myths in the Sumedang community is sustained not by a single factor, but by a powerful, interconnected system of maintenance. This system relies on a clear division of roles between key knowledge-holders and the general village populace. The key persons (elders and cultural guardians) act as the primary sources of mythic history and authority, actively narrating detailed stories and legitimizing the taboos. In contrast, the general villagers primarily absorb and enforce these beliefs through widespread acceptance of supernatural consequences and daily practices. Together, their complementary roles naturalize the myths through a combination of authoritative narrative, fear of punishment, and the performance of linguistic rituals like lexical substitution and apologies.

### Myth Supernatural Consequences Creates Enforcement Mechanisms (Myth Naturalization)

Beliefs in supernatural consequences, such as storms, lightning (*bentar gelap*), or sudden accidents, function as social regulators that sustain the power of myth. One informant recounted a story of a man struck by lightning after mocking local taboos, reinforcing fear and obedience within the community. This reflects Barthes's idea of myth as ideology presented as natural truth. While key figures narrate detailed mythic histories, villagers often absorb them as simple cause-and-effect logic (e.g., "sok hujan ageung" it causes a rainstorm), showing how authority shapes belief through narrative hierarchy.



**Table 1. Myth Beliefs: Supernatural Consequences**

Category	Group	Frequency	Description
Supernatural Consequences	Key Persons	4 Persons	Key persons narrate specific, often witnessed, incidents of supernatural punishment (e.g., KP3's story of the man struck by lightning) to validate the taboo.
	Villagers	6 Persons	General villagers uniformly believe in the cause-and-effect (e.g., " <i>sok hujan ageung</i> "), showing the broad acceptance of this enforcement mechanism.
Historical Normalization Legitimizes Generational Transmission (Myth Empties Reality of Its History)			
The participants' responses show that myths about taboo words have been passed down <i>turun-temurun</i> (from generation to generation), becoming deeply embedded in the community's cultural mindset. Many participants repeated expressions like " <i>Teu kenging da saur sepuh pamali</i> " ("do not question what the elders say is forbidden"), showing how <i>pamali</i> functions not just as a spiritual warning but as a moral truth. This reflects Barthes's (1972) view that myths transform historical meanings into naturalized realities. Over time, what once served as practical guidance now appears timeless and unquestionable. The stories told by key figures, such as the tale of <i>Eyang Terong Péot</i> , reinforce this cycle—where myth's power endures not through truth, but through repetition.			

**Table 2. Myth Beliefs: Historical Normalization**

Category	Group	Frequency	Description
Historical Normalization	Key Persons	4 Persons	Key persons provide specific historical context and genealogies, actively transforming history into natural truth (Barthes, 1972) and justifying the taboo's authority.
	Villagers	4 Persons	Villagers cite tradition ( <i>turum-temurun</i> ) and phrases like " <i>Teu kenging da saur sepuh</i> " as a self-sufficient moral logic, often without knowing the detailed history.

#### Politeness Rituals Demand Social Rituals

Expressions like *punten* (apology) when taboo words are accidentally spoken and the use of initials such as "P" for *Péot* function as communal rituals that reinforce the myth's authority. These acts illustrate Barthes's concept of mythical speech, where respectful behavior turns the



taboo into a natural social truth. As informants explained, saying *punten* or replacing *Péot* with *Kenyéd* reflects deep cultural respect and fear of misfortune, showing how linguistic avoidance has become an ingrained social habit.

**Table 3. Avoidance Strategies: Politeness Rituals**

Category	Group	Frequency	Description
Politeness Rituals	Key Persons	2 Persons	Key persons explicitly describe and prescribe the use of <i>punten</i> or <i>paralun</i> as a necessary ritual to fulfill spiritual forces after a taboo is broken, framing it as a core component of cultural respect.
	Villagers	0 Persons	Villagers did not spontaneously mention these specific ritual apologies, focusing instead on the broader avoidance of the words themselves.

#### Lexical Substitution Requires Myth Preservation (Ex-Nomination)

The frequent use of substitute words, such as *Kerud* for *Maung* and *Kenyéd* for *Péot*, functions as a linguistic strategy to maintain communication while respecting ancestral taboos. Rather than removing the forbidden meanings, this practice redirects them. As explained by local informants, mentioning *Péot* is believed to bring misfortune, leading people to use *Kenyéd* instead, a change rooted in the history of *Eyang Terong Péot*, once a royal advisor of the Sumedang Larang Kingdom. Barthes would define this as *ex-nomination*, where the avoidance of a word neutralizes its dangerous connotations. In communal and ritual contexts, such avoidance is reinforced through polite expressions like *punten* or by referring only to the word's initials. Following Barthes (1972), these acts can be seen as forms of semiotic protection, a way for the community to symbolically vaccinate itself against historical or spiritual harm.

**Table 4. Avoidance Strategies: Lexical Substitution**

Category	Group	Frequency	Description & Examples
Lexical Substitution	Key Persons	5 Persons	Key persons practice and explain the substitutions, linking them directly to historical figures and narratives (e.g., <i>Péot</i> → <i>Kenyéd</i> because of Eyang Terong; <i>Maung</i> → <i>Kerud</i> linked to Siliwangi).
	Villagers	5 Persons	Villagers practice the substitutions as an ingrained social habit, citing tradition and fear of consequences, but with less emphasis on the specific historical origins.



### Document Analysis: Validating Historical Roots

To support the oral histories shared by participants, a document analysis of local historical records was conducted. This aimed to confirm the existence of ancestral figures connected to the taboo myths. The most important source was *Rucatan Budaya Bumi Sumedang* by Dharmawan (1994), which verifies the story of *Péot*. The text identifies *Embah Terong Péot* as *Prabu Pancar Buana*, one of the four royal emissaries (*Kandaga Lante*) of the Padjadjaran Kingdom who traveled to Sumedang Larang. This evidence strengthens the villagers' accounts, showing that the word *Péot* carries deep historical meaning, not just folklore. For the *Maung* (tiger) taboo, no direct record of Batu Gara was found. However, secondary sources such as Darmayana (2012) explain that the tiger is a strong cultural symbol of *Prabu Siliwangi*, representing his power and mystical disappearance. This connection supports the villagers' belief that the *Maung* taboo is tied to the legacy of Siliwangi.

### DISCUSSIONS

The analysis shows that the act of avoidance is not simply a form of linguistic caution, but rather a ritual deeply influenced and maintained by the surrounding mythic system. In these practices, substitutions such as using *Kerud* instead of *Maung*, *Kenyéd* for *Péot*, *Pérah* for *Gagang*, and *Angkog* for *Bangkong* demonstrate what Barthes describes as *ex-nomination*, a process that neutralizes potentially dangerous meanings by avoiding certain signifiers. Furthermore, reparative politeness expressions like *punten* (an apology for accidental use) serve as symbolic gestures of protection, functioning much like acts of semiotic vaccination (Barthes, 1972). For example, when someone in Batu Gara purposely said *péot* while mentioning *Eyang Terong Péot*, it suddenly started to rain. The people believed this was not just a coincidence but a sign of ancestral punishment. Such stories turned natural events into moral lessons that everyone agreed to follow. The villagers, guided by the saying *duka da saur sepuh* ("we obey the elders"), used substitute words to keep peace in the community and to avoid bad luck or supernatural danger. The myth about rain or a demon tiger appearing after saying *Maung* is also connected to Batu Gara's geography, which is surrounded by mountains and holds the tomb of *Eyang Terong Péot*. These local features help strengthen the villagers' belief in the myths. These traditions continue because they are repeated, not always because people fully understand their origins. This reflects Barthes's idea that myths survive through repetition rather than logic. As a result, avoiding taboo words helps maintain the myths, and the myths, in turn, make the avoidance feel necessary. Historical records from Dharmawan (1994) also support the story of *Eyang Terong Péot*, identified as *Pancar Buana*, a royal envoy from the Padjadjaran Kingdom, which gives historical roots to the myth. While earlier studies in Citengah and Cipancar villages viewed similar beliefs as local customs, this research sees Batu Gara's practices as a way of preserving ideology where silence itself becomes a respected cultural tradition.

### CONCLUSION

Despite these challenges, the analysis successfully uncovered five primary taboo words *Maung* (tiger), *Péot* (skinny), *Gagang* (handle), *Bangkong* (frog), and *Ruhay* (charcoal). Each undergoes a transformation from literal denotation to rich cultural connotation, linking them to ancestral figures like *Eyang Terong Péot* and *Prabu Siliwangi*. The avoidance strategies lexical substitution (e.g., *Kerud* for *Maung*) and politeness rituals (*punten*) act as a form of Barthesian *ex-nomination*, perpetuating these myths. The community's belief in supernatural



consequences (e.g., rainstorms) for violations further naturalizes the system. In conclusion, the taboo words of Batu Gara are a living semiotic system. The difficulties encountered in 'decoding' them are symptomatic of their power. They are not just words to be avoided but are the very mechanisms through which cultural identity, ancestral reverence, and social cohesion are maintained and reproduced, perfectly exemplifying Barthes' theory of myth as a second-order signification system that thrives on repeatability rather than reasoned historical explanation.

## SUGGESTION

For future researchers, it is encouraged to look beyond a single village and explore how taboo words are used across different communities or dialects in Sumedang or even in other parts of Indonesia. For the people of Batu Gara, this study serves as a reflection of how language shapes their shared values and behaviors. Preserving traditional myths and linguistic traditions is important, yet it is equally necessary to engage with them thoughtfully, especially when they connect to issues of discrimination, marginalization, or misunderstandings between generations.

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