

Intergenerational Language Transmission and Identity Formation among Minority Language Speakers in the Kei Islands, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines intergenerational language transmission and identity formation among minority language speakers in the Kei Islands, Eastern Indonesia, where the Kei language (Veveu Evav) is gradually marginalized by the increasing dominance of Bahasa Indonesia. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected from three generational groups across ten families, alongside cultural leaders and teachers, through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, natural conversation recordings, and document analysis. The findings indicate that the Kei language remains strong in ritual and emotional domains but shows significant decline in educational and digital contexts. Parents act as linguistic mediators, balancing the preservation of traditional values with the practical demands of national language use. Younger speakers construct hybrid Kei identities through narratives, music, and online expressions, reflecting both local attachment and global aspiration. The study introduces the Intergenerational Identity Transmission Model (IITM), integrating intergenerational language transmission with identity formation, a linkage rarely explored in Indonesian sociolinguistics. This conceptual and empirical contribution broadens understanding of language socialization by incorporating online and interfaith dimensions, while providing insights for minority language revitalization and education policies that promote multilingual and culturally grounded identities.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, one of the world's most linguistically diverse nations, stands at a critical juncture where local languages are increasingly confronted by the forces of modernization, national integration, and globalization. Within this dynamic sociolinguistic landscape, the Kei Islands in Southeast Maluku provide a revealing case of how minority language communities negotiate their linguistic and cultural identities across generations (Kroskrity, 2018; Mataraw & Adriansyah, 2023). The Kei language, locally referred to as *Veveu Evav*, once served as the core of communal life, encompassing ancestral wisdom, kinship relations, and ritual practices. However, in recent decades, it has gradually lost ground to Bahasa Indonesia, the nation's lingua franca, particularly among younger generations who encounter the national language as the dominant medium in schools, mass media, and digital platforms (Aronin, 2019; Pupynina & Aralova, 2021).

This ongoing shift raises a critical question regarding the sustainability of intergenerational language transmission in communities where tradition and modernity coexist, sometimes harmoniously, but often in tension. The weakening of local language vitality in the Kei Islands is not merely a linguistic issue; it represents a broader transformation in identity, belonging, and cultural continuity that warrants deeper academic inquiry.

Several studies have documented similar trends across Indonesia's minority language regions. Nursanti (2021) and Sutrisno (2023) emphasize that language shift in Indonesia often occurs not through deliberate abandonment but through subtle realignments in everyday language use influenced by educational and economic aspirations. In contexts such as the Kei Islands, where Bahasa Indonesia serves as both a symbol of national unity and an instrument of social mobility, local languages are recontextualized as markers of intimacy, heritage, and nostalgia. Leppänen and Sultana (2023) and Sutrisno (2023) further observe that language vitality in Eastern Indonesia heavily depends on the continuity of oral traditions and intergenerational storytelling, practices increasingly disrupted by digital media consumption and formal schooling. Similarly, Lexander (2021) and Schneider (2022) identify a strong correlation between the erosion of indigenous languages and the reduced domains of use among children, particularly in semi-urban areas where national and global languages predominate. Collectively, these studies underscore a complex sociolinguistic reality: language loss in Indonesia cannot be explained solely through structural marginalization but must also account for shifting ideologies and the redefinition of local identity in a rapidly changing world.

The relationship between language and identity has long occupied a central position in sociolinguistic inquiry. Scholars such as Horvath (2021), Kelly-Holmes (2019), and Mirzoyeva and Syurmen (2020) argue that language not only reflects identity but also serves as a medium through which identity is constructed, negotiated, and performed. In multilingual contexts like the Kei Islands, this process becomes profoundly layered, as speakers navigate competing linguistic norms and ideological hierarchies. Studies in other Southeast Asian settings reveal that national languages often acquire symbolic capital associated with education and progress, while local languages are linked to emotional and cultural authenticity. More recent developments in linguistic anthropology suggest that identity formation in multilingual communities extends beyond physical spaces into digital and translocal arenas, where young people reimagine belonging through hybrid and performative linguistic practices. Within this evolving framework, intergenerational language transmission must be viewed not merely as the transfer of linguistic forms but as the transmission of values, worldviews, and identity resources that are continually reinterpreted under new social conditions.

Research focusing specifically on intergenerational language transmission in Indonesia remains limited, and even fewer studies connect this phenomenon to identity formation among minority speakers. Lee et al. (2023) and Prada (2022) highlight that many indigenous languages in eastern Indonesia persist primarily within ritual and kinship domains, with little documentation of how youth perceive their relevance to modern life. Gomes (2018) and

Kusters (2021) note that while Bahasa Indonesia fosters cohesion across the archipelago, it simultaneously accelerates the decline of local languages, particularly within intergenerational communication. Recent work by Canagarajah (2021) and Sakhiyya and Martin-Anatias (2023) examines how young Indonesians in multilingual environments use language as a means of self-expression and social distinction; however, these studies primarily focus on urban centers such as Jakarta and Yogyakarta, leaving peripheral regions underrepresented. Meanwhile, Solé (2022) and Yilmaz (2021) underscore the urgency of integrating local languages into school curricula but acknowledge that policy implementation often fails to account for local identity politics and community-specific ideologies.

The situation in the Kei Islands therefore provides a critical opportunity to examine the interplay between intergenerational transmission, language ideologies, and identity negotiation within a minority linguistic community undergoing socio-economic and cultural transformation. Previous research in Maluku, such as that of Ding and Chee (2023) and Weirich (2021), illustrates how local languages in the region are deeply embedded in customary law (*adat*) and kin-based systems, which form the backbone of collective identity. Yet, younger generations increasingly orient toward Bahasa Indonesia for mobility and modern affiliation, particularly in education and employment. These findings resonate with Mataraw and Adriansyah's (2023) discussion of "linguistic modernity" in Indonesia, where national identity projects inadvertently displace local languages to the periphery of symbolic life. What remains less explored, however, is how these generational differences manifest in everyday discourse, and how speakers in minority communities such as Kei actively negotiate their linguistic choices as expressions of belonging, resistance, or adaptation.

Existing literature on language maintenance and identity provides valuable descriptive insights but often treats intergenerational transmission and identity formation as separate analytical domains. Few studies have explored how these processes intersect, how the act of passing on a language also involves transmitting worldviews, moral orientations, and emotional affiliations. In Kei communities, language is not merely a communicative code but a moral and spiritual entity intertwined with ancestral cosmology. When younger speakers alternate between Kei, Bahasa Indonesia, and English, they are not simply shifting linguistic forms; they are performing and redefining who they are within overlapping systems of value, local, national, and global. Within this subtle negotiation lies the significance of the present research. By linking transmission and identity within a unified analytical framework, this study illuminates how language maintenance in minority contexts is both a cultural and ideological process shaped by family interactions, schooling, and digital participation.

The originality of this study lies in its integrative framework that unites intergenerational language transmission and identity formation, a relationship rarely explored in Indonesian sociolinguistics. Rather than viewing language shift as a unidirectional process of loss, this study conceptualizes it as a dialogic and adaptive phenomenon, wherein younger generations reinterpret linguistic inheritance through creative and context-sensitive practices. The introduction of the Intergenerational Identity Transmission Model (IITM) represents a theoretical advancement that captures the dynamic interplay among language

use, ideology, and identity construction across familial and digital domains. Through ethnographic immersion in Kei communities, this research contributes not only empirical evidence of linguistic vitality in Eastern Indonesia but also theoretical enrichment by extending models of language socialization to include interfaith and online interactions, dimensions increasingly central to youth identity in the digital age.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how Kei families and youth navigate the balance between preserving their linguistic heritage and adapting to the demands of national and global communication. It seeks to describe patterns of intergenerational language transmission, interpret how language choice shapes identity construction among younger speakers, and identify the social, educational, and ideological factors influencing the maintenance or erosion of the Kei language. By doing so, the research highlights the enduring significance of language as both a cultural resource and a site of identity negotiation within Indonesia's multilingual landscape, an understanding essential for developing inclusive educational policies and revitalization strategies that honor the archipelago's linguistic and cultural richness.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a sociolinguistic ethnographic design, aiming to deeply understand the processes of intergenerational language transmission and identity formation among Kei speakers within their social, cultural, and ideological contexts. The qualitative approach was chosen because language and identity cannot be reduced to numerical variables; rather, they must be interpreted through meanings, experiences, and everyday practices (Maher & Dertadian, 2018). In other words, the research seeks not only to examine what happens to Kei language use but also why and how such processes are understood by individuals within their cultural realities. The ethnographic approach enables a contextual exploration of linguistic practices, at home, in schools, during customary rituals, and within digital spaces, while observing intergenerational dynamics in everyday life.

The study was conducted in the Kei Islands, Southeast Maluku Regency, specifically in Tual City and several nearby villages such as Ohoitel, Langgur, and Elaer Lamagorang. The selection of these sites was based on two main considerations. First, the area represents one of the minority language communities in Eastern Indonesia that continues to use the local language in ritual contexts but shows signs of shift in daily communication due to the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia. Second, the area exhibits a unique sociocultural character, combining a strong customary system with increasing exposure to modernity through formal education and digital media. These features make Kei an ideal site for investigating how language, culture, and identity interact across generations within a complex social ecosystem.

Participants consisted of three generational groups within ten Kei families: the elderly generation (aged 55 and above), the adult generation (aged 30–50), and the younger generation (aged 13–25). A total of 30 participants were purposively selected based on their frequency of Kei language use and engagement in customary or educational activities. In addition to family members, local leaders, religious figures, and language teachers were

interviewed to provide institutional perspectives on language transmission. This intergenerational sampling aimed to trace patterns of linguistic inheritance and explore how language ideologies are constructed and negotiated within family and community domains (Mohajan, 2018; Stanley, 2023).

Data were collected over four months through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and natural conversation recordings. Participant observation involved temporary residence in the community, attendance at customary events, church gatherings, and family meetings to observe authentic language use. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in both Kei and Bahasa Indonesia to allow participants to express their perspectives freely. Informal conversations were recorded during communal activities such as shared meals, family discussions, and cooperative work, ensuring the authenticity of language practices. Additionally, documents such as ritual texts, local educational materials, and digital archives (e.g., Kei-language social media posts) were collected to trace shifts in language ideologies and identity representations (Khan, 2019).

Data analysis followed a thematic and discourse-analytic approach, employing an interactive model (Kekeya, 2021) comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Linguistic data and narratives from each generation were openly coded to identify key themes related to transmission patterns, domains of use, and language ideologies. Discourse analysis was then applied to interpret how language functions as a means of negotiating identity and symbolic power across generations. Language practices were thus interpreted not merely as communicative systems but as social and ideological acts that reflect Kei cultural values and social change dynamics.

To ensure data validity, this study employed triangulation of sources, methods, and time. Source triangulation compared data from different generational and institutional informants; method triangulation combined observation, interview, and document analysis; and time triangulation involved data collection at different periods, during both customary events and daily activities, to ensure the consistency of emerging patterns. Validation was further reinforced through member checking, wherein preliminary findings were shared with participants for clarification and confirmation of meanings (Bingham, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Intergenerational Transmission in Kei Families

The intergenerational transmission of the Kei language (*Veveu Evav*) within Kei families reveals a complex dynamic between cultural inheritance and adaptation to evolving social realities. Ethnographic observations conducted in several villages around Tual, such as Ohoiel and Ohoidertutu, along with interviews across three generational groups, show that the Kei language continues to hold a vital symbolic and emotional role, despite its diminishing use in everyday communication. Grandparents actively speak Kei with their grandchildren, particularly during storytelling, prayers, or family rituals. However, children rarely respond in Kei, often replying in Bahasa Indonesia. This situation exemplifies what may be termed “partial transmission”, a process in which the language is not functionally transmitted but

remains a significant cultural and affective symbol.

As explained by one 68-year-old informant (Mr. M.), he continues to speak Kei to his grandchildren even when they reply in Indonesian. For him, fluency is less important than ensuring that the younger generation continues to hear and recognize the sounds and meanings of the language. This view illustrates how older speakers regard language not merely as a communicative tool, but as a cultural inheritance that marks Kei identity. Field observations also revealed that during evening gatherings on the veranda, Kei becomes the primary medium for narrating ancestral legends or local myths. Yet, during the day, when children interact with peers or use mobile phones, Bahasa Indonesia dominates. This domain shift indicates that the Kei language has become largely restricted to affective and cultural contexts, while Bahasa Indonesia now fulfills most communicative functions.

This phenomenon aligns with the framework proposed by Frost and Catney (2020) and Vermeulen and Kranendonk (2021), who emphasize that language learning involves not only the acquisition of linguistic structures but also the internalization of social and cultural values attached to language use. In the Kei context, the Kei language functions as a medium of cultural socialization, through which values such as respect for ancestors, community solidarity, and local spirituality are transmitted. However, with increased social mobility and the dominance of formal education conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, this socialization process has been disrupted. Children grow up perceiving Bahasa Indonesia as a symbol of intelligence and modernity, while Kei becomes associated with traditional life, seen as less relevant to their futures.

The middle generation (ages 35–55) plays a crucial role as linguistic brokers, mediating between the older generation seeking to preserve Kei and the younger generation more comfortable in Indonesian. Parents often engage in mixed Kei–Indonesian speech, especially when conveying emotional or moral messages. For instance, a mother in Langgur was observed switching into Kei at the end of a reprimand to her child, suggesting that Kei retains a symbolic force for expressing authority and moral gravity. Such code-switching demonstrates that Kei continues to function as an emotive and moral register within family discourse.

As Guillemot (2018) and Subramaniam and Carolan (2022) argue, family language policy is often implicit, expressed through linguistic choices that mirror parental ideologies and social aspirations. In Kei families, the preference for Indonesian at home is usually motivated by the desire to ensure children's academic success and social mobility. Yet, parents still embed Kei words in their speech as symbolic acts of identity preservation. This ambivalent stance illustrates a tension between the will to maintain linguistic heritage and the practical submission to Indonesian hegemony as the language of education and progress.

Observations in Tual's elementary schools indicate that Kei is rarely used in formal contexts. Teachers almost exclusively use Bahasa Indonesia during instruction, and no institutional support exists for local language inclusion in the curriculum. Children reported that they only hear Kei at home from parents or grandparents, with several admitting they can "understand but not speak" the language. This reflects a sharp domain segregation, Kei is

confined to domestic and ritual domains, while Indonesian dominates public and institutional spaces. Such findings parallel Obućina and Saarela's (2020) analysis of domain shift in bilingual communities, where minority languages survive in intimate contexts but lose institutional functions.

Interestingly, Kei persists robustly in ritual and religious practices. During traditional ceremonies such as *tete nangan* (ancestral veneration) or weddings, Kei remains the exclusive language of prayers, chants, and ritual speech. In an observed ceremony in Ohoidertutu, ritual leaders used Kei with rhythmic and tonal precision that carried deep spiritual resonance. Although younger participants often did not fully comprehend the utterances, they displayed emotional engagement and reverence. This exemplifies a form of symbolic continuity, in which Kei endures as a sacred marker of collective identity and ancestral connection, even as its everyday communicative role fades.

At home, similar symbolic traces persist. Some children mix Kei words into Indonesian sentences when expressing affection or emotions, for example, using *ninan* ("love") or *veveu* ("home"). Such lexical remnants indicate that even as proficiency declines, Kei continues to function as a reservoir of affective meaning deeply rooted in familial memory.

The media and digital sphere further shape these transmission dynamics. Among Kei youth, most online content is produced and consumed in Indonesian or a hybrid of Indonesian–English. Only a few posts include Kei, usually in the form of traditional song lyrics or symbolic quotes. A 17-year-old respondent (A.) explained that she avoids using Kei online for fear of spelling mistakes and because "it doesn't fit social media." This suggests that ethnic identity awareness does not always translate into active linguistic practice; instead, it is performed through symbolic and visual representations of Kei culture.

Shifting Domains and the Role of Education and Media

The domain shift of the Kei language is most evident in education, public communication, and digital media, where Kei no longer occupies a strong position. Once the primary means of local interaction, Kei now functions more as an emotional and cultural symbol than a communicative medium. Field observations in Tual and neighboring villages (Ohoiel, Langgur) revealed that Kei is seldom heard in schools, government offices, or public events. Bahasa Indonesia dominates nearly all formal domains. According to Domain Theory, language use is shaped by context, participants, and communicative function (Strhan & Shillitoe, 2019). In Kei society, the dominance of Indonesian in education and media has transformed Kei from an "active medium of communication" into a "symbolic marker of ethnic belonging."

Observations in two elementary schools showed that Bahasa Indonesia is the exclusive instructional language. During one Indonesian language class in Ohoidertutu, a few students tried to relate national proverbs to local Kei expressions, but the teacher redirected them to Indonesian, explaining that using local languages might "confuse" students and deviate from the national curriculum. A teacher (Mrs. L.) further remarked that local languages are not encouraged because Bahasa Indonesia is "more useful" for national examinations and academic success. This reflects the hegemonic national language ideology, where Indonesian

is linked to progress and Kei is relegated to domestic or traditional spheres.

Interviews with high school students reinforced this pattern. A 15-year-old girl (R.) admitted that she understands Kei but feels “awkward” using it at school because her peers might laugh. This highlights the social pressures that erode the prestige of Kei in formal settings. Within Domain Theory, schools function as ideological domains, institutions that shape societal perceptions of language legitimacy. When only one language (Indonesian) is institutionally validated, Kei loses its epistemic authority as a language of knowledge and intellect.

A similar pattern emerges in public spaces across Tual. Signage, advertisements, and official documents are entirely in Indonesian. Kei appears only in cultural banners or symbolic home inscriptions. During a traditional ceremony in Ohoiel, the opening was conducted in Kei, but the rest of the event switched to Indonesian “so that everyone could understand,” particularly guests from outside the region. This demonstrates how Kei has lost autonomy in the public sphere, surviving mainly as a cultural aesthetic in ceremonial contexts.

Nevertheless, the erosion of Kei’s communicative domains does not necessarily entail a loss of identity consciousness. On the contrary, Kei youth are increasingly using digital media to renegotiate their ethnic belonging. The framework of Digital Multilingualism explains how social media provides hybrid linguistic spaces where language choice reflects both communication and performative identity (Dowd, 2020). On platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, young Kei users express pride through multimodal forms, traditional songs, Kei dances, or proverbs written in mixed Indonesian–Kei captions.

Analysis of youth social media accounts revealed that Kei often appears in hybridized captions or comments. For instance, in a TikTok video of the traditional *lir lim* dance, a user captioned: “Bangga jadi anak Evav, walau kadang lupa tutur, hati tetap Kei” (“Proud to be a child of Evav, though I sometimes forget the speech, my heart remains Kei”). This illustrates digital reterritorialization, the relocation of ethnic identity into online spaces as physical language domains recede.

A 21-year-old university student (T.) explained that while he rarely speaks Kei, he frequently uploads local music content, describing it as a way to “keep the culture alive without always speaking the language.” This reflects a new form of linguistic loyalty, measured not by fluency but by symbolic participation in cultural practices. Thus, digital media play a paradoxical role: while accelerating linguistic shift, they simultaneously create alternative arenas for maintaining Kei symbolic identity within globalized discourse.

Further observations in informal youth gatherings, cafés, music groups, and community meetings, show frequent Kei–Indonesian code mixing, with Indonesian as the dominant matrix language. These hybrid patterns are not merely signs of linguistic decay but deliberate identity strategies. In a local music collective in Tual, members used Kei words such as *veveu* (“home”) and *nafa* (“friend”) when discussing local life, suggesting that Kei continues to function as a semiotic emblem of “Keianness.”

From the perspective of Digital Multilingualism, such practices represent linguistic adaptation to digital globalization. Kei does not disappear but transforms into a symbolic and

performative language of identity. Kei youth articulate a dual reality: connectivity with the global world through Indonesian and digital platforms, and attachment to local heritage through Kei expressions. As noted by Isobel et al. (2019) and Merrill et al. (2019), in digital contexts, linguistic domains are no longer rigid but fluid and multimodal.

Nevertheless, serious challenges remain for Kei language revitalization. The absence of educational policy supporting local language instruction, combined with minimal media representation, reinforces the perception that Kei is irrelevant in the modern world. Many youth associate Kei fluency with “the old ways,” disconnected from academic or professional advancement. Consequently, motivation to use Kei in daily life continues to decline, even as emotional pride in Kei identity endures.

Negotiating Kei Identity among Younger Generations

Within the rapidly shifting sociolinguistic landscape of the Kei Islands, younger generations are confronted with new challenges in defining what it means to be “Kei.” In earlier generations, Kei identity was closely tied to linguistic competence, the ability to speak the Kei language served as the central marker of ethnic belonging. Today, however, such boundaries are increasingly fluid. The Kei language no longer functions as the sole determinant of ethnic identity; instead, Kei identity is expressed through cultural practices, symbols, and values that are internalized and performed in everyday life. This phenomenon reflects a transition from essentialist to performative and dynamic forms of identity, as articulated in the concept of Identity as Performance (Caminal et al., 2021; Ryabov, 2020). Identity is not something one possesses but something one enacts, constructed through actions, interactions, and social representations across both offline and digital spaces.

Ethnographic observations conducted in Tual and nearby villages such as Ohoiel, Ohoidertutu, and Langgur reveal that young people enact a flexible and adaptive form of Kei identity. During social events such as traditional music competitions, for instance, many adolescents converse primarily in Indonesian while wearing kain evav (traditional cloth) or performing Kei songs arranged in contemporary styles. At a cultural festival in downtown Tual, a group of young participants performed a traditional Kei dance accompanied by electronic music and bilingual lyrics in Indonesian and Kei. As one 19-year-old participant (R.) explained, the performance was “a way to show that we are still Kei, but in a modern way.” This statement reflects an awareness that being Kei is no longer measured solely by linguistic fluency, but by active engagement in sustaining Kei symbols and values in culturally relevant forms.

This phenomenon can be interpreted through Post-ethnic Identity Theory, which posits that ethnic identity in the global era is no longer fixed but shaped through the interweaving of locality, nationality, and globality (Boyle, 2023). Among Kei youth, there is no perceived need to choose between being Kei, Indonesian, or global; rather, these dimensions are negotiated simultaneously. Young people may primarily use Indonesian, listen to Korean pop music, and at the same time express pride in their Kei heritage through cultural symbols and digital narratives. In this sense, Kei identity exemplifies a hybridized identity, one assembled from overlapping cultural resources and social experiences.

On social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, Kei youth display increasingly creative and complex representations of Kei identity. Observations of several local TikTok accounts show that young people often merge humor, music, and local culture. They may speak Indonesian but insert Kei words or expressions to infuse a local flavor. In one short video, a young woman wearing modern attire performs a traditional Kei dance, ending the clip with the caption, “Bangga jadi anak Evav” [Proud to be Kei]. Such posts embody the performative aspect of identity, where actions, symbols, and language together construct new narratives of Kei-ness in digital spaces.

A 21-year-old university student (T.) explained in an interview that although he is no longer fluent in Kei, he still feels deeply connected to his community because he upholds Kei values such as *ain ni ain* (mutual help) and respect for elders. “What matters,” he stated, “is not how much Kei we can speak, but how we continue to live in a Kei way.” This shift from linguistic to value-based identification resonates with the notion of indexicality, in which linguistic or semiotic forms point to broader social meanings (Caminal et al., 2018; Haselschwerdt et al., 2019). While Kei may no longer function as a dominant medium of communication, its symbolic elements continue to index cultural belonging and moral orientation.

Campus life and youth communities in Tual further reinforce this perspective. Within the Ikatan Mahasiswa Kei (IMK, Kei Student Association), language use becomes a creative act of cultural performance rather than linguistic preservation. Meetings are generally conducted in Indonesian, yet when mentioning ancestral figures or traditional concepts, members switch to Kei with a tone of reverence. As one committee member (M., 22 years old) noted, “Using Kei in those moments makes us feel more connected to our roots.” Such selective and contextual code-switching represents a symbolic performance that reinforces solidarity and cultural continuity even amid linguistic attrition.

These observations illustrate that being Kei is no longer defined by linguistic purity but by emotional and symbolic attachment to Kei cultural values. Kei youth perform their identity flexibly and contextually, blending traditional and modern, local and global expressions. In the context of identity performativity, acts such as wearing traditional garments during ceremonies, posting mixed-language captions, or singing Kei songs in pop arrangements constitute a performance of identity, demonstrating how identity is constructed and negotiated through everyday social practice.

Further insights from Benu et al. (2023) and Feldman (2022) explain why younger Kei generations maintain a sense of ethnic belonging despite weakened linguistic boundaries. Post-ethnic identity theory rejects the notion that ethnic identity must be pure or exclusive. Instead, identity is situational, contextual, and often fragmented. Among Kei youth, this is evident in the way cultural symbols are used to create a sense of belonging without requiring full linguistic proficiency. In an interview, a high school student (N., 17 years old) admitted that she rarely speaks Kei but feels proud when hearing traditional songs or attending customary ceremonies with her family: “When I hear the song *Hain Tenan*, it feels like being called home,” she said. It is this emotional resonance within cultural experience, rather than

linguistic ability, that sustains Kei identity.

Field observations in local markets and youth hangout spaces in Tual also reveal the frequent use of Kei–Indonesian mixed speech. Adolescents often insert Kei interjections such as *aii*, *sika*, or *nahan* within Indonesian sentences. Although seemingly minor, these linguistic choices function as markers of social intimacy and local belonging. Such practices suggest that the Kei language has shifted into a semiotic resource, a symbolic repertoire employed to construct solidarity and differentiate identity.

Intergenerational Ideologies and the Continuity of Cultural Belonging

In Kei society in Southeast Maluku, language ideology plays a central role in shaping the direction and form of Kei language (*Veveu* Evav) continuity across generations. For the Kei people, language is not merely a communicative tool but a symbol of cultural existence, ancestral heritage, and social cohesion. However, shifts in education, migration, and digitalization have transformed the meaning and function of Kei. Different generations, grandparents, parents, and youth, hold divergent ideological orientations toward the language. As articulated by Farisiyah and Zamzani (2018) in the framework of Language Ideology and Heritage Language Transmission, language ideology acts as a key filter determining whether a minority language is maintained or weakened. In the Kei case, language ideology has not disappeared but undergone reframing, from viewing language as communication to understanding it as a symbol of identity and cultural pride.

Interviews with the elder generation show that Kei remains the essence of Kei identity. For them, losing the language means losing cultural roots and ancestral connection. One community elder (B., 68 years old) stated firmly, “If young people stop speaking Kei, they will forget where they come from.” For this generation, language embodies the spiritual bond that unites the community. Observations at a *rahan* (traditional ritual) revealed that Kei is still fully used in prayers and ceremonial speeches. The rhythmic and tonal nuances of Kei not only convey messages but also evoke deep emotional and spiritual resonance. Thus, for the elders, Kei carries a transcendent value that cannot be replaced by Indonesian or any other language.

The middle generation (aged 35–55), however, occupies an ambivalent position. They acknowledge Kei as a vital cultural legacy but recognize the pragmatic demands of modern life, where Indonesian dominates education and employment. As one mother (S., 42 years old) admitted, “I want my children to speak Kei, but they always answer in Indonesian, so I just follow along.” Field observations confirm that family interactions are largely conducted in Indonesian, with Kei expressions reserved for emotional moments, terms of affection, advice, or reprimand. This pattern demonstrates that Kei survives primarily in the affective domain, even as its communicative function declines.

Within Language Ideology Theory, this reflects a transitional ideology in which symbolic values are transmitted despite weakened communicative use. Parents act as mediators between inherited cultural ideologies and the pragmatic needs of modernity. Rather than rejecting Kei, they reposition it as a moral and cultural symbol reinforcing familial unity.

In contrast, younger generations express a more flexible and pragmatic language ideology. For them, Kei is not the principal marker of identity but one among many cultural resources to be accessed situationally. Interviews with high school and university students in Tual revealed that most seldom speak Kei but still regard it as a vital emblem of pride. One student (L., 20 years old) explained, “Even if I can’t speak it well, hearing Kei at traditional events feels like hearing the voice of home.”

In digital spaces such as the Instagram accounts of Kei student associations, ethnic pride is articulated visually and symbolically rather than linguistically. Posts often feature Kei proverbs, ritual photos, or regional songs captioned in Indonesian. This indicates an ideological shift from communicative to symbolic valuation of Kei, aligning with Andriyanti’s (2019) notion of symbolic ideology, that in multilingual societies, minority languages endure not because of daily use but because of their symbolic value as cultural heritage.

This ideological shift also manifests in education. Kei schools formally employ Indonesian as the language of instruction, with minimal space for local language use. Classroom observations in Langgur revealed that even during informal activities, children predominantly speak Indonesian. Teachers admitted that Kei is seldom used due to curriculum constraints. Yet, some educators integrate Kei selectively to contextualize local cultural values in civic or arts lessons. As one teacher (I., 38 years old) explained, “We use Kei sometimes so the children know that we have our own language.” This practice reflects ideological awareness at the pedagogical level, despite the absence of structural policies supporting Kei revitalization.

Across three generations, a consistent pattern emerges: high symbolic pride but declining practical use. In sociolinguistic terms, this condition represents symbolic maintenance without functional transmission, language is preserved in the symbolic domain but lacks sustained communicative continuity. Nonetheless, this condition also offers opportunities. The positive ideological attachment to Kei could serve as a foundation for culturally grounded revitalization efforts, particularly within education and digital media. If cultural pride can be integrated into creative learning and digital expression, Kei language may experience revitalization in forms that resonate with younger generations.

An emerging youth community in Tual exemplifies this potential. The group produces Kei-language music videos with Indonesian subtitles to make the lyrics accessible to peers. One member (P., 23 years old) noted that their goal is not merely to preserve the language but to “make Kei sound cool.” This reflects a critical ideological dimension: revitalization need not revert to traditionalist forms but can involve aesthetic and functional reframing aligned with contemporary sensibilities.

Ultimately, the sustainability of the Kei language depends not only on the number of speakers but on how the community interprets its cultural meaning. When Kei is valued as a symbol of identity and pride, it retains social vitality even amid limited use. However, if this positive ideology is not accompanied by concrete practices in education, family, and digital spaces, Kei risks remaining a purely symbolic heritage. Therefore, effective revitalization strategies must integrate ideological and practical dimensions, reinforcing language as both

a cultural legacy and a living medium relevant to the lives of younger Kei generations.

Towards an Intergenerational Identity Transmission Model (IITM)

The Intergenerational Identity Transmission Model (IITM) emerges as a synthesis of linguistic practice, ideology, and identity performativity within Kei society, which is currently undergoing social and linguistic transformation. In this context, the Kei language is not merely a communicative system but also a medium for transmitting values, symbols, and ethnic identity across generations and social spaces. The model seeks to explain how three generations, elders, parents, and youth, play distinct yet interconnected roles in sustaining Kei identity amidst the forces of modernization, globalization, and digitalization. By adapting the framework of language socialization and expanding it through the lenses of performativity and digital ethnography, the IITM offers a holistic perspective on how ethnolinguistic identity is maintained, transformed, and negotiated within contemporary social ecologies.

In the Cultural Anchoring dimension, the older generation acts as the custodian of cultural values and symbolic traditions. They maintain practices such as oral storytelling, folk songs, and ancestral narratives that carry moral and historical meanings. Field observations in Faan Village revealed that every afternoon, several elders gathered on the veranda of the traditional house (*rahan*), narrating the origins of the Kei ancestors and the importance of preserving *ain ni ain*, the principle of solidarity and kinship. Although younger people rarely sit and listen directly, some parents remarked that this tradition continues as “a sign of respect for the ancestors.” One informant, Mr. T., a 68-year-old customary leader, stated that for them, the Kei language is “a doorway to remembering who we are and where we come from.” This statement underscores that for the elders, language functions as a cultural anchor embedded in the community’s collective memory and spirituality.

However, the process of anchoring is not entirely linear. In practice, many traditional utterances are now being reinterpreted and repackaged by younger generations through digital media. This introduces the second dimension of the model, Linguistic Mediation. The parental generation, typically aged 35–55, serves as a mediator between traditional cultural values and modern sociolinguistic needs. They use Kei not only in ritual contexts but also alongside Indonesian in everyday interactions to ensure effective intergenerational communication. In an interview, Mrs. M., a primary school teacher from Ohoi Elaar, explained, “If I speak entirely in Kei, the children don’t understand. But if I don’t use Kei at all, they’ll forget it.” Such practices illustrate how parents function as linguistic bridges who ensure that cultural meanings are conveyed, albeit in pragmatically modified forms. This phenomenon reflects a strategic mechanism of linguistic adaptation rather than mere language shift.

From the perspective of language ideology and heritage language transmission (Andriyanti, 2019; Farisiyah & Zamzani, 2018), Kei parents display an ambivalent stance: on one hand, they acknowledge Indonesian as essential for their children’s social mobility; on the other, they continue to regard Kei as a symbol of ethnic pride. This mediation demonstrates that identity transmission no longer depends solely on linguistic proficiency but on the values transmitted through hybrid communicative practices. In other words, “being

Kei” is preserved through meaning-making processes rather than linguistic mastery alone.

The third dimension, Hybrid Identity Performance, is crucial for understanding how young Kei people construct their identities within digitally connected social spaces. Field observations in Ambon and Langgur indicate that Kei youth actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to express their ethnic pride. They upload locally inspired videos, singing traditional Kei songs in modern pop styles, creating traditional dances synchronized with electronic music, or writing captions in Indonesian interspersed with Kei words like *rera*, *wadar*, and *ain*. One informant, D., a 20-year-old university student from Kei, remarked, “Being Kei now isn’t just about speaking the language; it’s about showing that our culture is cool.” This statement reflects a form of hybrid, multimodal identity performativity, where Kei identity is articulated not only through language but also through symbols, narratives, and digital aesthetics.

From the perspective of identity as performance, such expressions represent social acts through which identity is continuously produced via interaction and representation. Kei youth engage in indexical inversion: instead of treating linguistic fluency as the core of identity, they shift its meaning toward symbolic, aesthetic, and emotional domains. In this context, digitalization does not erode Kei identity but rather opens new spaces for cultural recontextualization. As Kohler (2019) and Saddhono (2018) suggest in post-ethnic identity theory, identities in the global era tend to be fluid and performative, rather than rigidly bound by ethnicity. Kei youth, through their digital creativity, demonstrate that localness and globalness can coexist without mutual negation.

The IITM thus integrates these three dimensions into an interrelated conceptual framework: Cultural Anchoring provides the foundation of values and collective memory; Linguistic Mediation serves as an intergenerational adaptive mechanism; and Hybrid Identity Performance enables the rearticulation of Kei identity in digital contexts. Together, they form a dynamic identity ecosystem in which each generation exercises its agency in ensuring cultural continuity. In this view, identity transmission is not a vertical, one-directional process (from elders to youth), but an interactive network involving negotiation, reinterpretation, and collaboration across spaces.

Field observations further reveal that intergenerational interactions now occur more frequently in informal settings, such as family gatherings, religious events, or local cultural festivals. In these contexts, Kei is used symbolically, while Indonesian dominates communicative functions. Yet the symbolism of Kei continues to serve as a cultural reminder for younger generations. For instance, during the *met do faan* ritual, traditional prayers are still recited in Kei, while their meanings are explained in Indonesian so all participants can understand. This phenomenon demonstrates that reframing Kei from a “language of communication” into a “marker of cultural identity” strengthens its role in maintaining communal cohesion (Manns, Cole, & Goebel, 2019).

The IITM also extends language socialization theory by incorporating two critical dimensions: digitalization and interfaith interaction. In the religiously plural Kei society, language and cultural symbols function as bridges that transcend sectarian boundaries. For

example, in youth-generated digital content, Christian hymns are often performed using traditional Kei melodies, an instance of hybrid religio-cultural performance illustrating the interconnectedness of faith, culture, and ethnic identity. This phenomenon reinforces the argument that identity transmission now occurs not only through homes and schools but also through digital networks and interlinked spiritual spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the intergenerational transmission of the Kei language reflects not only linguistic inheritance but also a dynamic process of social identity formation amid complex socio-cultural changes. While Kei continues to thrive in ritual, emotional, and familial domains, younger generations exhibit hybrid identity practices that merge local values with national and global orientations. Indonesian functions as a tool of modernity and mobility, while Kei serves as a symbol of affective belonging and cultural origin, both intertwining in everyday life. The findings indicate that the sustainability of local languages depends not merely on frequency of use but on the ideological meanings each generation attaches to them. Through the lens of the Intergenerational Identity Transmission Model (IITM), this research underscores that language transmission and identity formation occur simultaneously within familial, communal, and digital spaces. Preserving minority languages such as Kei thus requires an approach that is not only linguistic but also cultural and social, one that acknowledges the agency of youth as mediators between tradition and modernity, and as pivotal actors in sustaining linguistic and cultural heritage in Eastern Indonesia.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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