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# ADAPTIVE IDENTITY POSITIONING: ETHNOLINGUISTIC STRATEGIES OF THE SIAMESE MINORITY IN KELANTAN, MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Minority identity in Malaysia is shaped by tensions between officially celebrated diversity and a national framework centred on Malay-Muslim dominance. This study examines how the Siamese minority in Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, Malaysia, employs ethnolinguistic strategies to negotiate its identity within a dominant Malay-Muslim sociopolitical landscape. While prior research focuses on historical, cultural, or religious aspects, contemporary sociological perspectives on Siamese identity in Kelantan remain limited. Using a qualitative ethnographic design, this study combines 197 days of participant observation with 15 in-depth interviews to capture the lived experiences of the Terbak Siamese. The findings reveal a tripartite strategy: (1) maintaining ethnolinguistic distinctiveness through Buddhist-Thai practices, formal Thai-language education, and everyday cultural life; (2) pragmatic adaptation in interactions with the Malay majority; and (3) strategic diversification via the Chinese language as a "third force" for mobility. These practices constitute "adaptive identity positioning", a dynamic approach that highlights how the Terbak Siamese actively perform identity and engage in boundary-making and belonging within unequal power structures. This study advances Southeast Asian minority studies by showing how community resilience supports educational attainment and equity, aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and informs global debates on minority language maintenance and identity negotiation.*

**Keywords:** adaptive identity positioning, ethnolinguistic agency, minority identity, cultural resilience, Siamese Malaysians

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## INTRODUCTION

Identity negotiation is central to minority communities, particularly in multicultural societies where dominant ethnoreligious narratives shape the socio-political order. Malaysia exemplifies this dynamic, as its national identity emerges from the interplay between officially celebrated diversity and state frameworks organised around the centrality of the Malay-Muslim majority (Cheah 2002; Chin 2020; Shamsul 2001). These dynamics create a structural environment in which minority groups must continually balance cultural maintenance with accommodation to dominant norms.

The Siamese community, with a deeply rooted presence in the northern/northeastern Malay Peninsula, faces complex challenges in negotiating cultural identity (Johnson 2012; Kuroda 2015; Suwannathat-Pian 1984/1985). Kelantan, particularly the district of Tumpat, where many Siamese settlements are concentrated (Na Thalang 2015), provides a significant context for examining these dynamics. The state's strong Islamic orientation, shaped by decades of Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) governance, creates social expectations that can generate assimilative pressures for non-Muslim minorities (Raybeck 1980; Stark 2004; Azmil 2022). Within this landscape, the Siamese constitute less than 1% of the population compared to approximately 95% Malays (DOSM 2024; Johnson 2012), making demographic asymmetry a central factor in their ongoing negotiation of identity (Kuroda 2002; 2005; Stark 2004; Human Rights Commission of Malaysia 2010).

In this context, language becomes a central medium through which the Siamese assert and maintain their identity. Beyond its communicative function, language anchors cultural memory, consolidates communal solidarity, and delineates ethnic boundaries (Edwards 2010; Tajfel and Turner 1986). For the Siamese, linguistic practices, ranging from everyday usage to intergenerational transmission, serve as strategic assertions of identity in a context where Malays hold greater sociopolitical power and access to resources (Bourgeois, Busseri and Rose-Krasnor 2009; David and Dealwis 2009; Fishman 1991; Mohammad Fadzeli et al. 2016).

Despite this centrality of language to identity negotiation, scholarship on the Siamese in Kelantan remains limited. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on the historical, architectural, or ritual-religious aspects of Siamese communities (Kaeosanit, Premsrirat and Kaewthep 2016; Kuroda 2002; 2005; 2015; Suwannathat-Pian 1984/1985), with disproportionate attention given to Kedah compared to Kelantan. Although studies on Kelantan, such as those by Golomb (1978), Kershaw (1969), Mohamed Yusoff (1987), and Johnson (2010; 2012), provide valuable foundations, they rarely engage with contemporary anthropological debates on acculturation and assimilation. This leaves a conceptual gap in understanding the community's identity work today.

This conceptual gap is particularly significant given the contemporary sociolinguistic landscape of the Kelantan Siamese, which is shaped not only by long-standing interactions with the Malay majority but also by engagement with other minority groups in the state, creating a multipolar social field (Golomb 1978; Johnson 2010; Winzeler 1985). This diversity is evident in their linguistic life, characterised by the intersection of their local Thai dialect with standard Thai, the regional Kelantan Malay dialect, and other community languages, notably Hokkien, Mandarin, and English (Golomb 1978; Johnson 2012; Mohamed Yusoff 1987; Winzeler 1985). Such multilingual practices underscore the need for context-sensitive identity strategies that shift across domains.

To address these gaps, this article examines how the Terbak Siamese mobilise their linguistic repertoire to negotiate belonging and identity within Kelantan's asymmetrical power field. Accordingly, the research question is: How do the Terbak Siamese employ ethnolinguistic resources as adaptive strategies to position themselves within a Malay-Muslim majority environment?

This study develops the concept of "adaptive identity positioning" to capture the agentic, contextually negotiated nature of Siamese identity work. Theoretically, it refines a model of cultural negotiation that bridges acculturation and ethnolinguistic identity frameworks, emphasising agency within structural constraints. Empirically, it highlights how ethnolinguistic practices across language, education, and ritual function as adaptive strategies for belonging, identity, and social positioning in a Malay-Muslim majority context. These findings inform more inclusive approaches to heritage language preservation and minority integration in multicultural societies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Ethnolinguistic Identity and Minority Language Maintenance

Language and identity are deeply intertwined, particularly in minority settings, where language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic reservoir of heritage (Edwards 2010; Liebkind 2001). While Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) elucidates how linguistic practice reinforces in-group cohesion and delineates out-group boundaries, its predominantly psychosocial focus provides limited traction in explaining the long-term maintenance of minority languages. Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (EIT) (Giles and Johnson 1987) advances this connection by positioning language as central to collective self-concept. Nevertheless, as Fishman (1991) emphasises, intergenerational transmission remains the decisive mechanism for sustaining linguistic heritage.

Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT), as outlined by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977), situates language survival within structural and institutional dynamics, identifying status, demographic strength, and institutional support as key determinants of a group's capacity to sustain its distinctiveness over time. The model's strength lies in its systematic account of how social power and institutional recognition shape linguistic outcomes. Yet, its macro-structural orientation risks reducing vitality to an external condition, overlooking the everyday agency through which minority speakers negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist such forces. Vitality, therefore, is not merely given by institutions but reproduced through lived practice, such as interaction, symbolic affirmation, and intergenerational transmission. In this view, language emerges not only as a medium of communication but as a sociosymbolic resource that anchors cultural memory and enables resilience amid unequal sociocultural terrains.

## Theoretical Frameworks of Acculturation and Identity Negotiation

The experiences of Siamese Malaysians as a minority group can be understood through acculturation, a concept first developed in anthropology (Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1936), later refined in cross-cultural psychology (Berry 1997), and now widely used to examine the adaptation of minority and indigenous groups to dominant cultures. Early frameworks, such as Park's (1950) "race relations cycle" and Gordon's (1965) assimilation model, cast adaptation as a linear, unidirectional process and often assumed that minority groups would lose significant portions of their cultural heritage. While these classical models laid the groundwork for studying cultural change, they were also critically limited because they assumed the inevitability of absorption into the dominant group, leaving little analytical space for the persistence of minority identities.

Berry's (1997) multidimensional model represents a deliberate departure from linear tradition. By outlining four strategies, namely assimilation, separation, marginalisation, and integration, Berry reframed acculturation as a multidirectional process that grants agency to minority groups, while also recognising environmental stressors such as discrimination, policy constraints, and social exclusion. Among the strategies, integration defined as the simultaneous maintenance of heritage culture and participation in the broader society (Berry 1997), offers a particularly relevant lens for the Siamese Malaysians, who strive to sustain Buddhist and Thai linguistic traditions while affirming their Malaysian belonging. However, because his treatment of acculturative stress is largely conceptual, Berry's model may underplay deeper structural inequalities, such as power relations, institutional barriers, and historical injustice, that condition the feasibility of "integration" in practice for marginalised minorities.

Subsequent theories have extended Berry's model. Segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993) situates adaptation within stratified social realities, proposing that socioeconomic conditions, racial hierarchies, and community resources generate differentiated pathways of adaptation. Its notion of selective acculturation, where minorities adopt aspects of the dominant culture for mobility while preserving core values, can be read as a structural variant of integration. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) add an intergenerational dimension to their typology of consonant, dissonant, and selective acculturation, arguing that different alignments (or misalignments) between parents and children in the speed and form of adaptation can significantly affect outcomes such as cultural continuity, parental authority, and educational attainment. Building on these insights, Alba and Nee (2003) reconceive assimilation not as an inevitable cultural erasure but as the weakening of ethnic distinctions, particularly in how those distinctions are expressed socially and structurally, thereby permitting greater boundary permeability without wholly dissolving identity.

Postcolonial critiques further destabilise the idea that acculturation strategies are freely chosen. Said (1978) highlights how minorities are positioned within enduring colonial categories, while Spivak (1988) reminds us that hegemonic discourses constrain subaltern voices. While some scholars emphasise the creative hybridity of cultural forms (Bhabha 1994), this study argues that for the Siamese, cultural boundaries are more often deliberately managed as a strategic act of resilience.

These perspectives refine rather than reject Berry's framework, revealing that the scope for "integration" is conditioned by power, ideology, and historical inequality. For the Siamese Malaysians, acculturation is less a matter of passive absorption and more an active, contested negotiation within asymmetrical terrains of language, religion, and national identity. Integration thus becomes a precarious achievement, sustained through continuous balancing acts between cultural persistence and national participation.

## Linguistic Capital and Strategic Adaptation in Complex Social Fields

Minority adaptation is often framed as a binary negotiation between a minority group and a dominant culture. However, in multicultural settings such as Malaysia, adaptation unfolds within pluralistic social fields where diverse linguistic communities exert influence. This complexity necessitates the concept of linguistic capital, derived from Bourdieu's (1991) theory of capital as accumulated resources. This concept is applied and critically refined by Heller (2007), who frames language proficiency as a resource that can be strategically mobilised for economic, social, and symbolic advantage.

For minority groups such as Terbak Siamese, language choices are deliberate investments in survival and advancement (Norton 2000), encompassing not only politically dominant Malay but also local dialects, such as Kelantan Malay, and other minority languages with social or economic utility. Such strategies diversify pathways for mobility and reduce reliance on assimilation, aligning with Berry's (1997) model of integration, which involves the simultaneous maintenance of heritage and active participation in broader society. However, Berry's framework only partially captures the multilingual and stratified realities of contexts like Malaysia. This complexity necessitates a focus on the agentic processes through which minorities manage ethnic distinctions within a multipolar social field.

This focus on the management of distinctions resonates with Barth's (1969) boundary theory, which conceptualises ethnic identity as constructed through negotiated boundaries rather than fixed traits. Boundaries may be made more permeable ("thin") for pragmatic purposes, such as adopting another language in commerce, while remaining "thick" in domains central to heritage, such as religion and family life. This balancing act enables minority communities to engage with broader social fields without relinquishing core identity, illustrating how boundary work operates at the level of everyday linguistic practice as a form of cultural resilience. Thus, in complex social fields, linguistic practice operates as a deliberate form of adaptation that allows minorities to navigate structural constraints (Heller 2007), negotiate belonging, and sustain distinctiveness through intergenerational transmission (Fishman 1991; David and Dealwis 2009).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences (Creswell and Poth 2024). In line with this epistemological stance, a qualitative ethnographic design was employed to explore how the Siamese community in Terbak Village negotiates and performs its identity. Ethnography was specifically chosen for its unique capacity to capture the nuances of everyday life, cultural and religious rituals, and in situ social interactions, providing a depth of understanding that is difficult to achieve through other qualitative approaches (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

Recognising the researcher's role as a co-constructor of meaning within this paradigm, the design incorporated within-method triangulation, in which multiple data collection procedures are used within a single methodological

framework to resolve the inherent biases of individual techniques and enhance the internal validity and analytical rigour of the findings (Denzin 2009). Specifically, the complementary use of participant observation and in-depth interviews, as discussed further in the data collection procedures section, enabled robust cross-validation of findings, ensuring that participants' narrated experiences were contextualised against their observable, lived practices.

## Research Site and Fieldwork

The research was conducted in Terbak Village, a prominent Siamese settlement located in the Tumpat district of Kelantan, Malaysia (see Figure 1). The primary focal point for fieldwork was the Wat Phikulthong Vararam, a central Theravada Buddhist temple renowned for its landmark Standing Buddha statue. The temple, along with the Thai Language, Dhamma and Culture School (TLDCS) located within its compound, serves as the social, religious and educational nexus of the community. This setting provided a rich context for observing the interplay between religious practice, community leadership and grassroots identity negotiation.

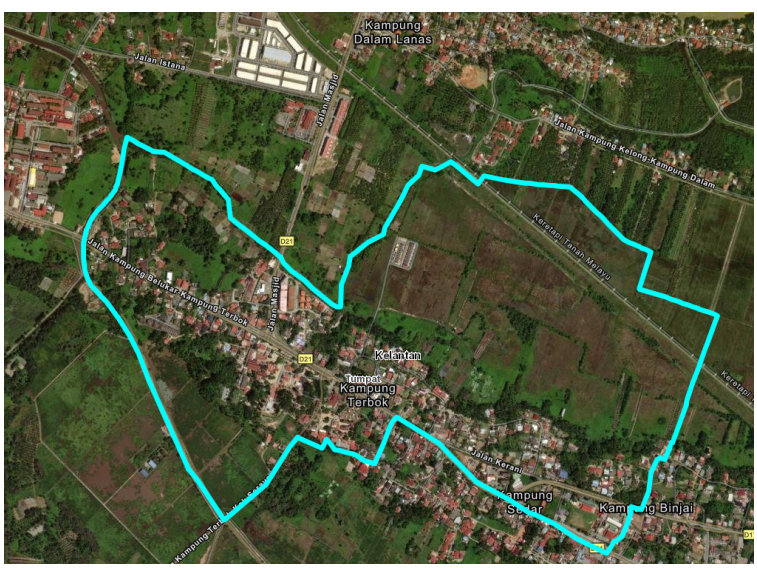



**Figure 1:** Map of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, and its surrounding areas.

*Source:* Reproduced from PLANMalaysia (n.d.).

However, it is acknowledged that the single-site focus on Terbak constrains the transferability of these findings, understood in qualitative rather than statistical terms (Patton 2014). Kelantan's distinctive sociopolitical dynamics, shaped by a strong Malay-Muslim ethos under PAS governance, may not fully

reflect the lived experiences of Siamese communities in states such as Kedah or Perlis, where political, demographic, and institutional configurations differ more substantially.

Sustained ethnographic fieldwork was carried out over a cumulative duration of 197 days between November 2022 and April 2024. The initial visits focused on field familiarisation and preliminary observation, which informed contextual understanding but were not treated as formal data for analysis. Formal data collection subsequently involved an intensive immersion phase, during which community rapport was established, supplemented by subsequent visits scheduled to coincide with significant cultural and religious events. This cumulative duration of over six months meets established ethnographic standards (Fetterman 2019), ensuring sufficient depth for data collection and analysis.

## Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using two primary qualitative methods, namely participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Participant observation, the core data collection strategy, involved deep immersion in the community's daily life and cultural events (Creswell and Poth 2024). This included attending religious ceremonies, festivals like Songkran, and informal social gatherings. Observations were documented through detailed field notes, photographs, and audiovisual recordings to create a comprehensive record of community dynamics (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Field notes were analysed alongside interview transcripts, providing a contextual anchor to triangulate self-reported data with observed practices (Denzin 2009; Patton 2014).

Fifteen semi-structured interviews complemented the ethnographic observations. The protocol, informed by the literature on identity negotiation and refined through two pilot interviews, ensured cultural sensitivity and clarity (Patton 2014). Participants were purposively selected to achieve maximum variation, including key institutional figures (e.g., temple leaders, association heads), teachers, and grassroots villagers. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to reach less accessible members (Patton 2014).

Of the 15 interviews, 12 most directly informed the analysis, achieving data saturation consistent with evidence that recurring themes can emerge within as few as 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006). Beyond saturation, the strategy emphasised prolonged engagement and thick description to capture the nuanced texture of lived experience (Creswell and Poth 2024). Participants informing this analysis are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Participants and relevant demographic characteristics

| Label | Gender | Age range | Participant background |
|---|---|---|---|
| P01 | Male | 70s | Community leader |
| P02 | Male | 50s | Community leader |
| P04 | Male | 50s | Community leader |
| P05 | Female | 20s | TLDCS administrator |
| P06 | Female | 60s | TLDCS administrator |
| P07 | Male | 30s | TLDCS teacher |
| P08 | Female | 20s | TLDCS teacher |
| P10 | Female | 20s | University student |
| P11 | Female | 20s | University student |
| P12 | Female | 40s | Unemployed individual |
| P13 | Male | 50s | Sales supervisor |
| P15 | Female | 50s | Food vendor |

## Data Analysis

Data were analysed manually using an iterative thematic analysis approach (Creswell and Poth 2024), following Nowell et al.'s (2017) six-phase process to ensure deep engagement with participant narratives. Transcripts and field notes were repeatedly reviewed to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated reflexively, grounded in participants' voices (Patton 2014), and captured concrete practices and experiences, such as "selecting names with dual Thai-Malay legibility" and "reserving Chehe dialect for intimate community interactions". These initial codes were iteratively compared, refined, and later grouped to form broader analytic themes, ensuring that thematic development remained systematic, transparent, and grounded in participants' lived experiences. Analytic memos documented this interpretive trajectory and captured the researcher's reflexive engagement with the data, acknowledging how positionality and perspective shaped the interpretation. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of interview and observational data, member checking with key informants, and a detailed audit trail (Patton 2014).

## Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

This study received initial ethical approval from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman's Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (Ref: U/SERC/74/2023). An updated ethical clearance letter was subsequently issued (Ref: U/SERC/92-A03/2024).

Formal data collection commenced following initial ethical approval. The study also adhered to the principles of the American Sociological Association (ASA 2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. A continuous process of reflexivity was maintained through detailed journaling, which enabled critical reflection on observations and the management of the researcher's positionality. This practice was essential for building the negotiated trust required for ethically sound and credible ethnographic research (Lassiter 2005).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study identified three central themes that illustrate how the Kelantan Siamese of Terbak Village negotiate their ethnolinguistic identity within a complex, Malay-Muslim dominant environment. These themes are: (1) the role of language preservation as a mechanism for in-group solidarity and boundary maintenance; (2) the dynamic and strategic nature of linguistic adaptation in navigating the dominant social field; and (3) the incorporation of Chinese as a "third force" to diversify pathways for socioeconomic mobility. Collectively, these themes reveal a community engaged in a continuous, agentic process of identity work that balances cultural continuity with pragmatic adaptation. They constitute a repertoire of adaptive identity positioning (AIP), which will be elaborated in the following sections.

### Theme 1: Language Preservation as a Cultural Anchor for In-Group Solidarity

For the Siamese of Terbak Village, language preservation sustains both cultural continuity and in-group solidarity within a predominantly Malay-Muslim Kelantan. Historically, the community has relied on the Chehe dialect, a Southern Thai variant spoken in Tak Bai, Narathiwat, as its primary mode of everyday communication (Golomb 1978; Johnson 2012). Fieldwork confirmed that while this oral tradition remains robust, older generations generally lack formal literacy in Thai, whereas younger members receive formal Thai education alongside national schooling in Malay.

Beyond this broad continuity, linguistic practice in Terbak is marked by internally recognised variation that carries social meaning. Fieldwork observations highlight how subtle phonetic differences signal degrees of proximity to Thailand and operate as micro-markers of local belonging within the broader Siamese community. As P10 explained, the Chehe spoken in Tak Bai is slightly closer to that of Jungkau or Jubakar, reinforcing a distinct local identity. Meanwhile, P08 noted that the Kedah Thai dialect is "even more

distant from ours," underscoring perceived intra-group differentiation. This emic awareness shows that symbolic value attaches even to minor linguistic distinctions, functioning as a resource of solidarity (Fishman 1991).

This dynamic resonates with Barth's (1969) formulation of ethnic boundaries as socially constructed rather than culturally essential, whereby linguistic distinctions delineate in- and out-groups, and aligns with Phinney et al. (2001), who show how such micro-level practices crystallise into collective identity formations. As P10 reflected, "our way of speaking shows who we are and where we belong," encapsulating how linguistic nuance serves both as an identity marker and a claim to heritage.

Beyond these oral practices, solidarity is also cultivated through formal Thai literacy, marking a shift from oral heritage to codified cultural capital. Community initiatives led by local institutions such as the Kelantan Siamese Association strengthen intergenerational transmission and resilience. P02 noted that Thai language education enables younger generations to sustain cultural traditions, uphold Theravada Buddhist practices, and affirm the social values that distinguish their community from the Malay majority.

These priorities take shape through Wat Phikulthong's TLDCS, which offers a formal six-year programme. The Prawichianmolee Foundation in Songkhla, Thailand, designed its curriculum to ensure the coursework and examinations align with modern Thai educational standards. As P06 observed, "Many can speak Chehe, but still cannot read and write Thai… If they do not learn, they will lose their mother tongue." P05 reinforced this urgency, "We just want to ensure they get enough Thai and Dhamma education… Otherwise, our Siamese culture could slowly disappear."

The TLDCS thus operates as a grassroots mechanism for reversing language shift, privileging intergenerational transmission as the bedrock of linguistic survival (Fishman 1991). A broader regional comparison reveals that minority communities elsewhere, such as the Pattani Malays in southern Thailand, also rely on community-based schooling to sustain their heritage language (Suwilai and Uniansasmita 2012). However, unlike the Terbak Siamese, Pattani Malay faces increasing language shift among younger generations, highlighting the relative resilience of Terbak's institutional and temple-supported transmission. Similarly, other minority groups in the region, such as the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, have seen a decline in the use of their distinct dialect in favour of dominant languages (Pue and Shamsul 2011).

By institutionalising literacy, the Siamese actively maintain their heritage language, which aligns with Liebkind's (2001) observation that heritage literacy supports collective identity and ethnic consciousness. This intergenerational

transmission of language (Fishman 1991) simultaneously produces cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) that the community can strategically deploy, forming the cornerstone for AIP. Consequently, the capacity to read, write, and speak Thai not only sustains heritage but also constitutes a resource that enables practical engagement with the broader sociopolitical and economic environment.

Viewed through EVT (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor 1977), these initiatives highlight how community scaffolding supports Thai's survival despite the state's privileging of Malay. EVT clarifies structural vitality, while EIT (Giles and Johnson 1987) highlights the symbolic and in-group legitimacy these practices derive. Together, they demonstrate that language serves as both a communicative medium and a cultural resource that binds the community, sustains a sense of belonging, and ensures continuity amid structural constraints.

P08 emphasised the functional importance of literacy: "As Siamese, it is not okay not to know Thai; it is special to us, so we must read and speak it." This sentiment was echoed by P07, who framed literacy as a shield against cultural erosion. He argued that illiteracy risks the loss of the community's core essence: "Our identity is not just our language. It is in the songs we sing, the food we eat, the dances we perform... That is how we understand where we come from."

P07's reflections highlight how language, while central, operates within a broader constellation of cultural practices, reinforcing solidarity through a shared sense of heritage and a sense of belonging. In this sense, the community's songs, food, dances, and rituals constitute embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), which transmits tradition and confers symbolic legitimacy within and beyond the village. Such practices are not merely preservational but constitute active boundary work, sustaining identity in a changing Kelantanese social field where cultural life is continually negotiated amid shifting linguistic and political conditions.

Furthermore, the use of Thai in religious ceremonies constitutes a profound performance of cultural anchoring. While the ritual chanting (*suot mon*) itself is conducted in Pali, Thai is used for sermons (Dhamma talks), explanations, and communal interactions, ensuring participant comprehension and engagement. Even in ceremonial practices such as almsgiving (*tak bat*), Thai frames the exchange between monks and laypeople. On an observed Visakha Bucha Day, the abbot of Wat Phikulthong delivered his Dhamma talk in the Chehe dialect, blending local linguistic identity with formal religious practice. For P04, this strengthens both cultural ties to Thailand and a sense of local belonging.

These ritual practices demonstrate how the community actively enacts and reinforces its linguistic heritage. Building on Fishman's (1991) emphasis on intergenerational transmission, EIT (Giles and Johnson 1987) frames the

temple as a central site where ethnolinguistic vitality is actively performed and legitimised, connecting ritual practice to community cohesion and the ongoing negotiation of ethnic identity in Terbak Village.

At the same time, these efforts exemplify a broader pattern whereby minority communities, confronting dominant cultural narratives, rely on grassroots engagement to sustain their language and cultural identity. For the Terbak Siamese, the persistent use of Thai in everyday life and religious contexts is a form of cultural resilience, affirming identity in the face of indirect but pervasive assimilative pressures stemming from national language policies and the broader majoritarian order (Cheah 2002; Chin 2020; David and Dealwis 2009; Gill 2014; Shamsul 2001).

Ultimately, these linguistic practices and institutional efforts form a resilient, inward-facing foundation. Here, language functions as a symbolic anchor of identity, sustaining cultural memory, reinforcing ethnic consciousness, and distinguishing the community from the majority population (Fishman 1991; Phinney et al. 2001). This aligns with Golomb's (1978) observation that Siamese communities in Kelantan articulate their "Thainess" as a united front in relation to their Malay neighbours through language, religion, rituals, and everyday life. Such practices demonstrate that language preservation is inseparable from boundary maintenance, cultural resilience, and collective self-definition. This cultural anchoring is not a passive preservation, but a foundational and strategic act that underpins the "adaptive" negotiations and identity positioning explored in the subsequent themes.

## Theme 2: Pragmatic Adaptation through Linguistic Flexibility with the Malay Majority

Beyond language preservation as part of cultural continuity, Terbak's Siamese community engages in deliberate forms of linguistic adaptation, strategically enacting identity within Kelantan's mainstream social field. These practices are not signs of assimilation or cultural erosion but rather an agentic integrationist orientation (Berry 1997). This is evident in the management of bilingualism, naming conventions, and the situational deployment of codes across domains. This theme conceptualises these practices as AIP, a repertoire through which linguistic practices are strategically aligned with shifting social contexts, reflecting how community members navigate their sociopolitical environment and position themselves relative to dominant groups (i.e., social positioning).

Central to this adaptive positioning is the differentiated use of linguistic codes. Kelantan Malay dominates external domains, such as commerce, education, and dealing with bureaucracy, while Chehe is reserved for internal domains, including home, friendship, and community life. This linguistic repertoire emerges within a broader sociolinguistic context, where Malay functions as

the national language and the lingua franca of Kelantan (Mohamed Yusoff 1987; Pue and Shamsul 2011). Such code choice embodies pragmatic adaptation and symbolic boundary-making: Malay enables institutional integration, while Chehe sustains cultural intimacy and continuity.

This logic is visible in bilingual communicative practices. Fieldwork noted signage and banners at Wat Phikulthong in both Thai and Malay, used for donation drives and temple initiatives, alongside bilingual wedding cards. On one level, this facilitates comprehension among older Siamese who are less literate in Thai; on another, it extends accommodation to non-Siamese visitors, including local Chinese who frequent the temple. These practices reflect a conscious effort to create an inclusive, bicultural communicative space that is welcoming to outsiders without compromising the centrality of Thai within Wat Phikulthong's core activities.

This adaptive approach extends into deeply personal identity markers, particularly naming practices, which serve as a subtle form of cultural negotiation. P08 illustrated this by noting that part of her name refers to a type of flower in Thai, yet remains "easy to pronounce" in Malay. This choice reflects a conscious calibration of identity: the name is designed to be biculturally legible, carrying an internal, culturally specific meaning for the Siamese community while minimising friction in Malay-dominant settings. Names thus operate as cultural mediators, anchored in Siamese identity while remaining calibrated for cross-cultural recognition.

In digital spaces, practices such as transliterating Thai into the Latin alphabet and blending it with Malay exemplify the same logic of adaptive bilingualism. This digital code-meshing is more than a technical workaround for those unable to type the Thai script; it is a pragmatic reflection of their lived, multilingual reality. This practice demonstrates the fluid integration of their Siamese heritage and Malaysian identity, showing how they navigate and express their biculturalism even in informal online interactions.

Conversely, younger generations educated in standard Thai at the TLDCS negotiate a different tension: despite their proficiency, they overwhelmingly prefer Chehe for daily communication. As P05 explained, speaking standard Thai among peers is socially stigmatised as "pretentious," since it signals adopting a language variety associated with Bangkok and urban centres. This mirrors Kelantanese Malays' preference for dialect over standard Malay, where the latter carries connotations of formality and urban cosmopolitanism. By privileging Chehe, youth reinforce in-group solidarity while resisting linguistic hierarchies that privilege external, urban norms.

Far from signalling contradiction, this tension between literacy and practice reveals the strategic calibration at the core of AIP, rather than simple co-existence. Competence in standard Thai is strategically instrumentalised, granting access to Thai media, education, and transnational symbolic capital. At the same time, Chehe retains primacy in religious and everyday interaction as the language of intimacy and embodied belonging.

Community members actively calibrate their language choices, weighing symbolic, social, and pragmatic consequences, thereby performing AIP across domains. This domain-specific functional differentiation demonstrates how AIP allocates linguistic resources toward distinct identity goals: external legitimacy and mobility on one hand, and internal cohesion and social positioning on the other.

These micro-level strategies unfold within broader socio-political hierarchies, linking AIP to structural power and revealing how linguistic pragmatism operates under asymmetrical constraints. This process aligns with EIT (Giles and Johnson 1987) and Barth (1969), showing how distinctions are actively reproduced to sustain boundaries, reinforce group solidarity, and negotiate legitimacy. Viewed through a postcolonial lens, these performative, context-sensitive practices show how the Terbak Siamese strategically navigate hegemonic Malay-Muslim norms, using language as a tool of cultural negotiation, social positioning, and legitimacy management rather than a simple reflection of demographic or linguistic dominance (Said 1978).

Building on these observations, AIP functions as an adaptive repertoire, enabling the Terbak Siamese to strategically mobilise linguistic and cultural resources to negotiate social positioning, sustain internal cohesion, and maintain external legitimacy within asymmetrical socio-political hierarchies. Informed by Berry's (1997) framework, this perspective reframes integration as an ongoing, performative group-level enactment involving the conscious deployment of cultural resources in response to institutional pressures, power asymmetries, and symbolic hierarchies inherent to the state.

In contrast to Berry's notion of a relatively stable balance, the evidence here shows integration as a continuous, situational recalibration shaped by institutional constraints, communal priorities, and dynamic social positioning. Thus, Berry's integration strategy becomes a point of departure rather than a terminus. Rather than proposing a new theoretical paradigm, AIP functions as a strategic orientation, guiding the community's positioning within Kelantan's sociopolitical landscape while operationalising Berry's concept through the enactment of specific ethnolinguistic repertoires.

Overall, this approach frames integration as a dynamic, community-grounded process of cultural translation, boundary-making, and strategic negotiation of social and symbolic capital. The Terbak Siamese's bilingual strategies, therefore, reflect an ongoing collective performance of both cultural distinctiveness and societal belonging, rather than a step towards assimilation.

### Theme 3: Chinese as a "Third Force" in Diversifying Adaptive Pathways

The repertoire of AIP extends beyond a simple Thai-Malay binary, as shown by the community's engagement with Chinese influence, which operates as a "third force" that provides alternative pathways for socioeconomic mobility and shapes identity negotiation. This engagement with another minority language reflects a nuanced understanding of Malaysia's pluralism, offering both practical opportunities and an additional space for cultural positioning. Chinese thus serves not only as a pathway to economic and educational advantage, but also as a complementary dimension of identity that provides a subtle buffer against Malay's predominant influence, enabling strategic social positioning.

The influence of Chinese in Kelantan's Siamese villages has deep historical roots, with many older residents, particularly those of Sino-Siamese heritage, being fluent in Hokkien, a Southern Min Chinese dialect, due to long-standing interactions with the local Chinese community (Golomb 1978; Johnson 2012; Mohamed Yusoff 1987). These interactions were reinforced by intermarriage, shared religious practice and mutual participation in temple life, making Siamese temples important cultural spaces for both groups. This interethnic mingling continues today in communal spaces such as *kopitiam*s, where Hokkien is still occasionally used.

However, a generational shift is evident: younger residents increasingly prioritise Mandarin due to its perceived economic value in contemporary Malaysia. Fieldwork revealed that many Siamese and Malay parents now enrol their children in SJK(C) Yuk Tze, the only Chinese-medium primary school in Tumpat, where non-Chinese students currently outnumber Chinese peers, reflecting a strategic recalibration of linguistic and educational investment.

This trend exemplifies Bourdieu's (1991) linguistic capital. For the Terbak Siamese, Mandarin is mobilised as a symbolic and material resource, extending beyond communicative competence to serve as a strategic asset for navigating Malaysia's pluralistic and economically stratified landscape. Unlike Thai or Malay, respectively anchored in group solidarity and national belonging, Mandarin confers transnational values through trade, education, and Chinese business networks. This choice reflects their broader AIP logic: language choice is a deliberate, identity-calibrated investment in both cultural resilience and socioeconomic mobility.

Parents view Mandarin proficiency as a deliberate strategy to expand their children's horizons. As P05 put it, "the more languages one knows, the better," underscoring a collective orientation towards linguistic diversification as a means of enhancing mobility. The case of P01's daughter, whose employer provides allowances for proficiency in both Chinese and Thai, illustrates how linguistic capital converts directly into economic capital. These examples show that linguistic competence is actively leveraged to negotiate both opportunity and authority. Mandarin thus functions as a "third force," expanding pragmatic opportunities while reshaping the community's identity terrain, enabling the Siamese of Terbak to negotiate new forms of belonging and legitimacy.

This phenomenon resonates partly with Portes and Zhou's (1993) theory of segmented assimilation, especially their notion of selective acculturation, which involves adopting elements of dominant cultures for mobility while preserving core values. By embracing Mandarin, the Siamese strategically position themselves along an additional axis of economic and cultural power, complementing their engagement with Malay while maintaining Thai-Buddhist traditions.

Nevertheless, the model's explanatory power is limited in Malaysia's plural society. In contrast to the American setting, where mainstream-subculture divides dominate, Malaysia features overlapping hierarchies: Malays wield political and cultural authority, Chinese hold economic capital, and other groups navigate niches in between. This complex hierarchy, shaped by colonial-era ethnic positioning, constrains minority agency and limits the community's ability to influence social and linguistic outcomes (Said 1978; Spivak 1988). In such a setting, segmented assimilation risks oversimplifying the multidirectional negotiations that characterise Siamese strategies, which align better with the integrationist orientation observed in Theme 2 (Berry 1997).

However, strategic adaptation entails tensions. P11 recalled being reprimanded for speaking Chehe at school, illustrating how linguistic choices are policed. This policing reflects Heller's notion of the school as a "language market" (in Martin-Jones 2007), where language operates as a site of power and identity negotiation. Here, the Chinese school enacts an institutional preference for Mandarin, establishing Chinese not only as a medium of instruction but also as a marker of belonging within that space, while simultaneously marginalising alternative codes like Chehe.

This episode also illustrates how adaptive strategies involve selective boundary permeability: engagement with Mandarin in pragmatic domains, such as education, signals openness to external opportunities, while the community continues to maintain "thick" boundaries in core identity domains, including religion and Chehe use at home. Bilingualism thus becomes a regulated performance, shaped by institutional norms and unequal power relations.

Interestingly, P11 also reported using Chinese at home to exclude younger siblings from conversations. Such micro-level practices highlight the pragmatic deployment of linguistic repertoires to negotiate authority, intimacy, and group membership, exemplifying AIP. It also resonates with Heller's (2007) notion of bilingualism as situational and power-laden. For the Terbak Siamese, language choice is not simply a matter of preference or proficiency, but an ongoing negotiation shaped by institutional pressures, intergenerational relations, and the broader sociolinguistic economy.

Ultimately, their multilingual practices, viewed through Barth's (1969) concept of boundaries, both preserve Siamese distinctiveness and expand avenues for selective adaptation across socioeconomic domains. Chinese operates as a stabilising form of linguistic capital that complements Malay engagement while enabling autonomy in cultural positioning. This reflects a "thin" boundary in commerce and education for strategic exchange, alongside a "thick" boundary in core identity domains, confirming Barth's argument that ethnic identity is actively negotiated. Engagement with multiple external forces, including Chinese as a "third force," allows the community to optimise social positioning while safeguarding cultural heritage.

## Anchor and Adaptation: A Unified Framework

The three themes collectively constitute the AIP framework (Figure 2), which operates through the tension between two distinct theoretical mechanisms. This dual mechanism allows the community to strategically manage ethnic distinctions within a multipolar social field.

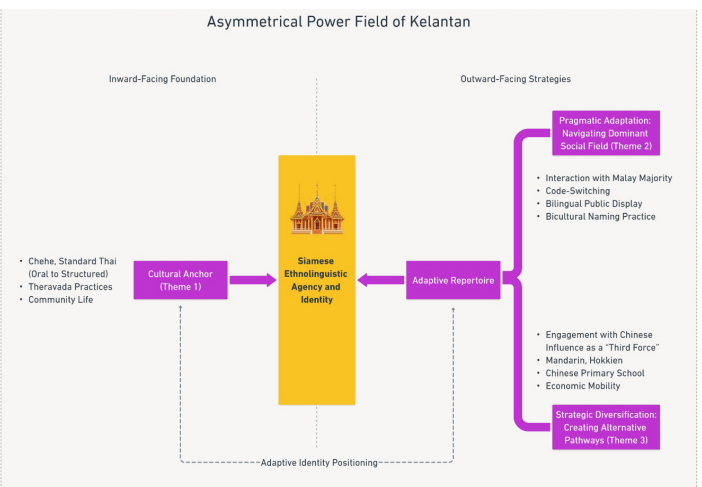



**Figure 2:** Adaptive Identity Positioning—cultural anchor sustains core identity; adaptive repertoire guides engagement across social, linguistic, and economic domains.

First, the "cultural anchor" (Theme 1) serves as the internal core, where language, religion, and ritual maintain in-group solidarity. Second, this core supports a flexible, outward-facing "adaptive repertoire" (Themes 2 and 3), comprising pragmatic tools such as bilingualism, naming conventions, and economic diversification through Chinese, among others, which collectively enable the community to interface with the external world.

This outward-facing repertoire relies on bottom-up integration strategies (Berry 1997) and the mobilisation of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991; Heller 2007). By treating boundaries as permeable for pragmatic advancement (using Malay and Chinese) but rigid for core identity domains (using Thai/Chehe), the community effectively navigates Kelantan's asymmetrical power field. This synthesis demonstrates that Siamese identity is not a static inheritance but a continuous, agentic performance of boundary maintenance (Barth 1969) and strategic diversification.

## CONCLUSION

This study reconceptualises minority identity as a dynamic process of boundary-making and belonging rather than a fixed inheritance. The Terbak Siamese demonstrate a repertoire of AIP, combining cultural anchoring in Thai and Chehe with pragmatic engagement with the Malay majority and strategic diversification through Chinese. This identity work is not defensive withdrawal but an active, forward-oriented negotiation within an asymmetrical power field.

A growing intergenerational differentiation in linguistic repertoires shows that adaptive strategies are not only situationally flexible but also temporally dynamic. Older villagers retain deeper familiarity with Chehe and Hokkien, while younger cohorts are increasingly shaped by formal Thai literacy and Mandarin-medium schooling. These evolving patterns suggest that present-day adaptive strategies are likely to shape identity outcomes in the coming decades, reflecting a forward-looking dimension of AIP that responds to shifting aspirations and competencies. Through these strategies, the community's multilingual investments contribute to educational attainment and more equitable opportunities by fostering culturally grounded learning and reducing socio-cultural barriers to education, reflecting the broader aims of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education and Sustainable Development Goal 10 on reduced inequalities.

While this study focuses on a single village, its rich contextual detail provides a basis for considering the relevance of its findings to other Siamese communities. Kelantan's PAS governance, Terbak's concentrated settlement, and strong institutional infrastructure inform the community's adaptive strategies, with

contextual conditions shaping how these findings may extend beyond the study site. To enhance practical relevance, policies could include: (1) state-supported heritage language programmes in schools; (2) targeted grants and institutional support for temples and cultural associations to run intergenerational language and cultural initiatives; and (3) training and incentives for bilingual/bicultural teachers in minority-populated regions. Future research could explore comparative state-level studies, longitudinal analyses of multilingual practices, and urban Siamese diasporas to deepen the understanding of minority resilience. Framing heritage as an active resource demonstrates how minority communities sustain cultural integrity while actively engaging in Malaysia's evolving sociopolitical landscape.

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