

# Toponymy and Shifted Identity: A Study of the Language Change in Rejang-Language Village Names

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**Abstract**—This study examines the changes in village names from the Rejang language to Indonesian in Kepahiang Regency, Bengkulu, focusing on referential meanings, community perceptions, and the impact on local cultural identity. Using referential meaning analysis and thematic analysis based on interviews with both older and younger generations, the findings show that the language shift alters not only linguistic forms but also the cultural, historical, and spiritual values embedded in the original toponyms. This process weakens intergenerational cultural transmission and raises the risk of losing local identity. While some community members accept the name changes as part of adaptation to modernity, many believe the original names should be preserved to ensure historical continuity and maintain local wisdom. The study emphasizes that Rejang toponyms serve as cultural archives that record collective memory and calls for integrating education, scholarly documentation, and regional policies to sustain the cultural identity and heritage of the Rejang community.

**Index Terms**—toponymy, Rejang language, language shift, Kepahiang Regency, cultural identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Rejang language is one of the regional languages spoken in Bengkulu Province. McGinn (2007) argues that Rejang is an Austronesian language spoken by the majority of the Rejang ethnic community. According to him, as a sub-branch of the Malayo-Polynesian language family, Rejang has five dialects, namely Musi, Pesisir, Lebong, Rawas, and Kebang Agung. These dialects are distributed across five regions: the Musi dialect is spoken in Rejang Lebong, the Pesisir dialect in North Bengkulu, the Lebong dialect in Lebong Regency, the Rawas dialect in Central Bengkulu, and the Kebang Agung dialect in Kepahiang Regency. The Rejang language is facing a serious decline, marked by the increasing use of Indonesian in mother–child communication within families. This shift weakens the position of Rejang, a trend also confirmed by other studies on its decreasing everyday use. Supporting this, Astuti et al. (2023) found that Rejang is rarely used among adolescents, largely due to limited language preservation efforts, including the absence of Rejang language instruction in schools within Rejang-speaking areas. In Indonesia, particularly in Bengkulu, the government has not yet issued policies that support the teaching of regional languages.

In addition to the issues discussed above, this phenomenon becomes particularly interesting as it is reflected in the naming of villages in Kepahiang Regency, where efforts have been made to translate village names from the Rejang language into Indonesian. This phenomenon can be observed in several examples of data presented below:



Figure 1. Batu Bandung Village (Buteu Banung)  
Source: Kampung KB, BKKBN

Based on the researchers' initial knowledge as native speakers, later validated through consultation with family members in Batu Bandung, the name *Batu Bandung* derives from an original Rejang toponym. The original name in Rejang is *Buteu Banung*, which, when translated into Indonesian, becomes *Batu Bandung*. In Indonesian, *batu* means "stone," while *Bandung* refers to the capital city of West Java Province, widely known as the "City of Flowers." However, compared with the original Rejang meaning, *buteu* indeed means "stone," but it cannot be understood in a literal sense. In the cultural context of the Rejang community, *buteu* refers to two stones positioned side by side or symmetrically, exhibiting a similar form. Meanwhile, the word *banung* should not be equated with *Bandung*, because in Rejang, *banung* means "a pile" or "a cluster." This semantic shift illustrates how the process of changing place names in Kepahiang Regency can alter literal and cultural meanings, as place names represent local knowledge about locations and their references (Saeed, 2015).

Village names are not merely linguistic representations but also reflect the cultural and social understandings of the communities that inhabit them. They demonstrate how geography is transformed into a homeland and serve as markers of the richness and sensibility of humans in naming land (Ainabek et al., 2024). Village names that originally derive from the Rejang language were part of local cultural identity, conveying the meanings and traditional values of the Rejang community. Every nation names places through its language (Arifoğlu, 2020), often embedding historical, mythical, or origin narratives. When these names shift into Indonesian, some cultural meanings or values may be lost, reducing younger generations' understanding of their cultural roots. Changes in place names reflect shifts in identity at the personal, community, and national levels (Guyot & Seethal, 2007). On the other hand, such changes can reduce appreciation for local languages and cultures, including Rejang. They may also erode the preservation of traditions, customs, and practices closely tied to the region's original language.

Thus, it is important to understand how changes in village names from Rejang to Indonesian affect their forms, meanings, and public perceptions in Kepahiang Regency. This issue is addressed within the field of toponymy, which examines the relationship among language, culture, geography, and regional history (Ainabek et al., 2024). Toponyms have significant historical value as they reflect local values and a sense of belonging that inhabitants attach to their territory (Gálvez, 2024). Accordingly, this study formulates the following research questions:

1. What are the referential meanings of village names in Kepahiang Regency in both the Rejang and Indonesian languages?
2. How do the people of Kepahiang Regency perceive the changes in village names from the Rejang language to Indonesian?

Research on toponymy has addressed diverse contexts, including linguistic change and socio-political dimensions of place naming. For instance, Wu and Young (2023) examine power and resistance in island renaming in the South China Sea, but pay limited attention to cultural and community meanings. In Bengkulu, several studies have documented local toponyms (Diani & Rahayu, 2024; Erliani et al., 2021; Melin et al., 2024), but they are largely descriptive and synchronic, treating local toponyms as static entities. As a result, the cultural implications of village name changes in Kepahiang Regency remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, the present study examines village names that have shifted from Rejang to Indonesian, emphasizing the cultural and historical values embedded in these toponyms (Kearns & Berg, 2002; Muscat, 2011). As an ancient Chinese proverb reminds us, *"If names are not correct, then the words spoken will not sound right"* (Wodzer, 2024, p. 28).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Toponymy

Toponymy, a branch of onomastics, examines the naming of places and geographical features (Mursidi & Soetopo, 2021). Beyond indicating location, place names function as repositories of collective memory and cultural identity (Reszegi, 2023). Chávez Reyes (2003) emphasizes that toponymic studies trace the history and social meanings behind naming practices, while Trapero (1995) highlights that such processes are collective in nature and reflect social consensus. Accordingly, toponymy is understood as a multidisciplinary field that integrates linguistic, historical, and anthropological perspectives (Sánchez, 2019; Winheski, 2024). Functionally, place naming reflects the relationship between humans and their geographical environment (Radding & Western, 2010; Woodman, 2014) and serves as a cultural representation of the speech community (Hough, 2016; Wilson, 1998). Place naming is shaped by social, political, and ideological forces, functioning as a site of identity construction and symbolic power (Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2009). Therefore, toponymy is not merely a linguistic symbol but also a socio-cultural construction that reflects a community's values and knowledge systems.

In this study, the theory of toponymic attachment proposed by Kostanski and Puzey (2016) is used to explain how individuals and communities develop emotional bonds and identities with places through four main elements: (1) history/memory, which connect communities to the past; (2) community, which affirms boundaries of social inclusion and exclusion; (3) emotion, as a form of affective engagement with space; and (4) actions/events, which generate the symbolic meaning of a place. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the symbolic and cultural impacts of toponymic change on local identity.

This study applies the naming typology of the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS) by Blair and Tent (2021) to classify village names in Kepahiang Regency based on semantic and referential criteria, including descriptive (geographical features), associative (flora, fauna, or human activities), incidental (specific events), eponymous (names of individuals or groups), borrowed (from other languages), and innovative (new linguistic forms without direct reference to local realities). The ANPS framework serves as an analytical tool for identifying shifts in meaning and cultural values resulting from language change. Combined with toponymic attachment theory, this approach provides a systematic means of examining changes in Rejang-language village toponyms.

### B. Referential Meaning

The discussion of meaning is part of semantics. Semantic analysis enables the identification of cultural and geographical relationships within a region, as reflected in its toponyms (Gálvez, 2024). In linguistics, the relationship between sign and signified is a central concern of semantics (Chaer, 2002). According to Kridalaksana (2008), meaning is the relationship of correspondence or non-correspondence between language and entities outside language. Chaer (2014) classifies meaning into several types, including grammatical meaning, contextual meaning, referential meaning, non-referential meaning, denotative meaning, connotative meaning, conceptual meaning, associative meaning, word meaning, term meaning, idiomatic meaning, and proverbial meaning. Referential meaning is meaning that has a reference or an external referent, whereas non-referential meaning does not have a reference or referent (Chaer, 2014). This study applies referential meaning analysis to examine village names in Kepahiang Regency. Referential meaning relates to the concepts that exist within a community, functioning as points of reference and grounded in social reality, namely, the realities present in the social environment (Djajasudarma, 2006). This relationship arises from activities outside language, manifested in linguistic forms (symbols) such as objects, events, and other phenomena (Djajasudarma, 2006). This study provides a framework for interpreting the relationship between village names and their socio-cultural referents, as well as for comparing meanings in Rejang and their Indonesian counterparts. This analysis helps determine whether language shift preserves or obscures the original referents.

### C. Perception

This study also examines community perceptions of village name changes involving a shift from Rejang to Indonesian. Such changes can influence how communities understand their identity, history, and cultural values, potentially reshaping perceptions of local heritage (Guyot & Seethal, 2007; Urbanc & Gabrovec, 2005). The Indonesian Comprehensive Dictionary or Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) defines perception as the direct reception of something. Perception can also be understood as the process by which individuals interpret sensory stimuli from the

environment to form meaningful understandings of their surroundings. This process is not merely passive data reception but involves active interpretation influenced by past experiences, memory, and cultural context (Testa et al., 2016).

This understanding of perception underpins the analysis of how communities interpret changes in village names. Examining community responses allows this study to assess how language shifts in village names affect cultural identity, sense of belonging, and attitudes toward local heritage, making perception analysis essential to understanding their social and cultural impacts.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design using a descriptive–analytical method, which involves describing empirically observable facts as they are recorded in the data and subsequently analyzing them (Ratna, 2010; Sudaryanto, 2015). The research takes the form of fieldwork involving human participants. A total of 75 participants were recruited from 18 villages in Kepahiang Regency that have experienced language shift. All participants are members of the Rejang ethnic group. This approach is consistent with recent developments in cultural studies that emphasize the importance of integrating textual analysis with empirical data collected from the target audience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The table below provides an overview of the demographic characteristics and distribution of the study participants.

TABLE 1  
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

| Characteristics | Category                         | Number | Percentage |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|--------|------------|
| <b>Gender</b>   | Male                             | 40     | 53%        |
|                 | Female                           | 35     | 47%        |
| <b>Age</b>      | 57-75                            | 14     | 19%        |
|                 | 40-48                            | 25     | 33%        |
|                 | 16-30                            | 36     | 48%        |
|                 | Rejang                           | 75     | 100%       |
| <b>Ethnic</b>   | Elementary to Senior High School | 39     | 52%        |
|                 | Bachelor Degree                  | 36     | 48%        |
|                 | Others                           | 0%     | 0%         |

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their relevance to the research objectives. The involvement of two groups from different generations was essential to obtain intergenerational perspectives on the meanings and perceptions of village names. The number of participants was considered adequate to achieve data saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006).

#### B. Materials

The primary data consist of oral interviews and informant statements from semi-structured interviews conducted between September and November 2025, focusing on village name origins, cultural meanings, and community perceptions of name changes. Local informants were generally unable to explain the meanings of Indonesian village names and instead referred to the original Rejang names. To supplement this, the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI) was used to trace referential meanings, not as a substitute for local interpretations, but to support comparative analysis between Rejang and Indonesian toponyms.

#### C. Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility while maintaining a clear focus on the research questions. The interview guide was developed by the researchers and covered several key themes, including: (1) the origins and meanings of village names; (2) intergenerational knowledge, involving both younger and older generations, regarding their village names; and (3) perceptions of language shift and its impact on the community's cultural identity. This instrument enabled participants to articulate their experiences and interpretations in depth, while ensuring focus and consistency across interviews.

#### D. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through field visits and online interviews, depending on participant availability. In each village, four to five participants were interviewed for 30–45 minutes, with interviews audio-recorded, transcribed, and conducted under strict ethical standards, including informed consent and anonymity (Flick, 2020). To examine intergenerational transmission, 36 younger participants (born 1995–2009) were also included. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model and thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and results reporting. Manual analysis and researcher triangulation were employed to ensure rigor and minimize interpretive bias.

## IV. RESULTS

## A. Village Name Changes

To trace the referential meaning in Rejang, the researchers relied on the community's collective knowledge, obtained through structured interviews with elderly and customary leaders. This approach is based on the fundamental concept that toponymy is a cultural sign formed through social consensus and collective memory, rather than a lexical unit whose meaning can be derived compositionally. Meanwhile, presenting the results using the KBBI is not intended to equate the cultural meanings derived from community interviews with dictionary definitions; rather, it serves as a normative semantic indicator. It demonstrates how village names that have undergone language shift can be understood within the general lexical system of Indonesian. Thus, the KBBI is used as a tool to analyze shifts in semantic reference, rather than as the primary source for understanding the cultural meanings embedded in village names.

The difference in sources when interpreting the meanings of village names in Rejang and Indonesian arises from the community's dual naming system: the names known and used by local people versus the official names. This results in the Indonesian names often lacking referential grounding within the community. Therefore, using different methods to explore meaning actually reveals a referential imbalance between Rejang toponyms and official Indonesian names. Consequently, village names become a space for negotiation between the community's collective memory and government policy. Village names are not merely labels devoid of meaning; they often reflect the community's cultural identity and history. For example, village names on Hainan Island in the Li language reflect the natural and cultural characteristics of the Li ethnic group, including folklore and traditional skills (Zhang et al., 2025).

TABLE 2  
LANGUAGE SHIFT PROCESS FROM REJANG TO INDONESIAN

| Rejang Language            | Referential Meaning                                                                                  | Indonesian Translation  | Referential Meaning from the KBBI                                           | English Translation       |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Tajung Balai</i>        | Office located by the water (Interview)                                                              | Sosokan Cinta Mandi     | Cannot be traced                                                            | The Intimate Bath of Love |
| <i>Cito Menei</i>          | The place of the legendary figure <i>Sepahit Lidah</i> , who liked to bathe (Interview)              | Cinta Mandi             | A strong feeling of enjoying cleaning the body (KBBI Online)                | Love Bath                 |
| <i>Cito Menei Beleu</i>    | The site of the legendary figure <i>Sepahit Lidah</i> , who liked to bathe (Interview)               | Cinta Mandi Baru        | A strong feeling of enjoying cleaning the body (KBBI Online)                | The New Love Bath         |
| <i>Limuh Pet</i>           | The <i>Limuh</i> fruit, which tastes bitter, as a result of <i>Sepahit Lidah's</i> curse (Interview) | Limbur Lama             | A nonstandard form of <i>lembur</i> (KBBI Online)                           | Old <i>Limbur</i>         |
| <i>Limuh Beleu</i>         | The <i>Limuh</i> fruit, which tastes bitter, as a result of <i>Sepahit Lidah's</i> curse (Interview) | Limbur Baru             | A nonstandard form of <i>lembur</i> (KBBI Online)                           | New <i>Limbur</i>         |
| <i>Tajung Benakat</i>      | The riverside plain with a large tree, named <i>Benakat</i> (Interview)                              | Taba Air Pauh           | <i>Menamba</i> Water <i>Mangga</i> (KBBI Online)                            | Taba of Air Pauh          |
| <i>Tajung Pajang Dahet</i> | A vast expanse that stretches out (Interview)                                                        | Penanjung Panjang Atas  | Cannot be traced                                                            | Upper Long Penanjung      |
| <i>Tanjung Pajang Bes</i>  | A wide expanse that stretches out (Interview)                                                        | Penanjung Panjang Bawah | Cannot be traced                                                            | Lower Penanjung Panjang   |
| <i>Dan Bijea</i>           | A place where people from various regions stop under the <i>binjai</i> tree (Interview)              | Peraduan Binjai         | Place where <i>binjai</i> trees meet (KBBI Online)                          | Binjai Resting Place      |
| <i>Ujen Mas Kauk</i>       | A drop of water that turned into gold (Interview)                                                    | Ujan Mas Bawah          | A nonstandard form of <i>rains</i> (KBBI Online)                            | Lower Ujan Mas            |
| <i>Buteu Banung</i>        | Clustered stones (Interview)                                                                         | Batu Bandung            | A hard object in Bandung City, West Java                                    | Bandung Stone             |
| <i>Tehtik</i>              | A <i>Tehtik</i> River (Interview)                                                                    | Tertik                  | Cannot be traced                                                            | Tehtik                    |
| <i>Bioa Hamen</i>          | A <i>Hamen</i> River (Interview)                                                                     | Air Raman               | Shredded meat in liquid form (KBBI Online)                                  | Raman River               |
| <i>Tabah Beleu</i>         | Wood that was cut as a sign of the way home (Interview)                                              | Taba Baru               | New <i>Menaba</i> (KBBI Online)                                             | New Taba                  |
| <i>Buteu Kalung</i>        | A person who hangs a stone around their neck (Interview)                                             | Batu Kalung             | Stone and flower arrangement (KBBI Online)                                  | Necklace Stone            |
| <i>Buteu Belehek</i>       | A person who turned into stones arranged in a line (Interview)                                       | Batu Belarik            | Cannot be traced                                                            | Striped Stone             |
| <i>Muaro Lakap</i>         | A <i>Lakap</i> River (Interview)                                                                     | Muara Langkap           | The place where a river ends and a <i>langkap</i> tree stands (KBBI Online) | Langkap Estuary           |
| <i>Kemang Serei</i>        | A pool called <i>Kemang Serei</i> (Interview)                                                        | Kembang Seri            | Cherry landscape (KBBI Online)                                              | <i>Seri</i> Flower        |

Table 2 above shows the phenomenon of the language shift in village names from Rejang, the native language of the ethnic group in Kepahiang Regency, to Indonesian. Field research results obtained through interviews with customary

leaders in each village, and compared with the KBBI, indicate differences in meaning, structure, and the influence of the origins of village names in Rejang when translated into Indonesian. For example, several village names show a shift in referential meaning due to the language shift into Indonesian. One example is the translation of *Buteu Banung* into *Batu Bandung*. Another example is the village of *Tanjung Balai*, which was originally called *Sosokan Cinta Mandi*; its meaning is lost when translated into Indonesian. Furthermore, the village name *Cito Menei* in Rejang originally held cultural and historical significance, referring to a figure regarded as magical by the community. However, its meaning in the KBBI is entirely different, changing to “a feeling of enjoying cleaning the body”.

An interesting phenomenon occurs when the Indonesian Translations of village names that are classified as untraceable. This is because the Indonesian language does not accommodate names derived from rivers or other specific geographical features. For instance, the village name *Tehtik* is derived from the name of a river. However, when compared to its Indonesian form, *Tertik*, no corresponding meaning can be found. This issue cannot be resolved, even when asked of the informants, because they assume that *Tertik* is the Indonesian form of *Tehtik*, whereas no standard entry exists in the KBBI for *Tehtik*.

These changes in village names indicate that the language shift from Rejang to Indonesian is not limited to lexical changes; it can also alter aspects of cultural identity and the community's collective memory. Name changes also affect meaning in a highly visible way, thereby eroding the local values embedded in traditional village names for the community.

### B. Toponym Categorization

Rejang-language village names in Kepahiang Regency show diverse toponymic categories and embody rich cultural values and customary practices. Interview data indicate that these categories reflect local knowledge, folklore, and community history embedded in traditional names. In toponymic analysis, linguistic patterns and cultural narratives are inseparable, as each category represents collective memory and cultural identity. Therefore, understanding Rejang village names requires an integrated interpretation of linguistic and cultural dimensions, as illustrated in Table 3:

TABLE 3  
CATEGORIZATION OF VILLAGE TOPONYMS IN KEPAHIANG REGENCY

| Rejang Language             | Toponym Categorization | Indonesian Language            | Toponym Categorization | English Translation       |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Tanjung Balai</i>        | History/Memory         | <i>Sosokan Cinta Mandi</i>     | Descriptive            | The Intimate Bath of Love |
| <i>Cito Menei</i>           | History/Memory         | <i>Cinta Mandi</i>             | History/Memory         | Love Bath                 |
| <i>Cito Menei Beleu</i>     | History/Memory         | <i>Cinta Mandi Baru</i>        | History/Memory         | The New Love Bath         |
| <i>Limuh Pet</i>            | History/Memory         | <i>Limbur Lama</i>             | History/Memory         | Old Limbur                |
| <i>Limuh Beleu</i>          | History/Memory         | <i>Limbur Baru</i>             | History/Memory         | New Limbur                |
| <i>Buteu Kalung</i>         | History/Memory         | <i>Batu Kalung</i>             | History/Memory         | Necklace Stone            |
| <i>Buteu Belehek</i>        | History/Memory         | <i>Batu Belarik</i>            | History/Memory         | Striped Stone             |
| <i>Buteu Banung</i>         | History/Memory         | <i>Batu Bandung</i>            | History/Memory         | Bandung Stone             |
| <i>Tehtik</i>               | Association            | <i>Tertik</i>                  | Association            | Tehtik                    |
| <i>Bioa Hamen</i>           | Association            | <i>Air Raman</i>               | Association            | Raman River               |
| <i>Muaro Lakap</i>          | Association            | <i>Muara Langkap</i>           | Association            | Langkap Estuary           |
| <i>Kemang Serei</i>         | Association            | <i>Kembang Seri</i>            | Association            | Seri Flower               |
| <i>Tanjung Benakat</i>      | Descriptive            | <i>Taba Air Pauh</i>           | Descriptive            | Taba of Air Pauh          |
| <i>Tanjung Pajang Dahet</i> | Descriptive            | <i>Penanjung Panjang Atas</i>  | Descriptive            | Upper Long Penanjung      |
| <i>Tanjung Pajang Bes</i>   | Descriptive            | <i>Penanjung Panjang Bawah</i> | Descriptive            | Lower Penanjung Panjang   |
| <i>Dan Bijea</i>            | Actions/Events         | <i>Peraduan Binjai</i>         | Actions/Events         | Binjai Resting Place      |
| <i>Ujen Mas Kauk</i>        | Actions/Events         | <i>Ujan Mas Bawah</i>          | Actions/Events         | Lower Ujan Mas            |
| <i>Tabah Beleu</i>          | Actions/Events         | <i>Taba Baru</i>               | Actions/Events         | New Taba                  |

The table above provides an overview of the distribution of toponymic categorization, which has been grouped according to Blair and Tent's (2021) theory of toponymic attachment and Kostanski and Puzey's (2016) typology of toponymy. Based on this grouping, Rejang-language village names serve as the primary reference for the community in interpreting the meanings of Indonesian-language village names. This is supported by interview data, which indicates that the community lacks an understanding of Indonesian names; they often assume that Indonesian village names are equivalent to Rejang names. As illustrated in the interview excerpt: “The meaning does not change with the name change; the meaning remains from the Rejang language”. This statement demonstrates that the community's knowledge of meanings in Indonesian is not a living, actively used knowledge within the community, unlike their understanding of village names in Rejang, which they comprehend deeply. Therefore, the researchers will discuss in greater detail the toponymic categorization in the Rejang language, as the field data from interviews primarily reflect the community's understanding of their village names in Rejang. The Rejang-language toponymic categorization is as follows:

#### Historical Category

The identity of a place or region plays a crucial role in helping communities connect with their territory, as toponyms function not only as geographical markers but also as symbols of layered historical, cultural, and spiritual identities. In Kepahiang Regency, several village names in the Rejang language fall within the historical-legendary toponymic category and are closely associated with oral traditions and the legendary figure *Sepahit Lidah*. *Tanjung Balai* Village,

for instance, was named by *Rio Besei*, a figure regarded as a symbol of justice, after a riverside village office, and is believed to provide ancestral protection to descendants of the original inhabitants. Similarly, *Cito Menei* and *Cito Menei Beleu* derive their names from *Sepahit Lidah*'s fondness for bathing in the local river, while *Limuh Pet* and *Limuh Beleu* originate from a story in which *Sepahit Lidah* cursed sweet *limuh* fruit to become bitter (pet) after his unspoken request was ignored. *Buteu Kalung* Village recounts a bride and groom who were cursed to be turned to stone while wearing necklaces, and *Buteu Belehek* refers to a family resting in a circular formation (belehek) who were transformed into aligned stones, thereby reinforcing the story through visible physical formations. *Buteu Banung* likewise commemorates an individual who was cursed to be stoned after failing to respond to *Sepahit Lidah*. Collectively, these village names demonstrate that Rejang toponyms function as cultural archives, preserving folklore, moral teachings, spiritual beliefs, and social values, and highlighting language as a medium for transmitting collective memory and cultural identity across generations.

#### Association Categorization

Place naming often reflects features associated with a location (Blair & Tent, 2021). In Kepahiang Regency, Rejang-language village names in the associative category commonly derive from environmental elements, particularly rivers. Villages such as *Tehtik*, *Bioa Hamen*, *Muaro Lakap*, and *Kemang Serei* are named after nearby rivers that support daily community activities. These naming practices show that, in Rejang culture, village names function not only as geographical labels but also as expressions of local ecological knowledge, positioning rivers as central to both livelihood and cultural life.

#### Category of Descriptive

Place naming that reflects inherent characteristics of a location constitutes the descriptive toponymic category, which encompasses topographical, relational, locational, and functional aspects. In Kepahiang Regency, several Rejang-language village names illustrate this pattern. *Tanjung Benakat* Village, for example, derives its name from the community's observation of their environment: *tanjung* refers to a flat riverside area that is important for daily activities and settlement boundaries, while *benakat* denotes a prominent tree that serves as a recognizable local landmark. The combination of these features produces a unified toponymic meaning that reflects how the community interprets and relates to its living space, indicating that village names function not only as geographic references but also as expressions of collective environmental experience (Direct interview, 13 September 2025). Similarly, the villages of *Tajung Pajang Dahet* and *Tajung Pajang Bes* were originally part of a single area known as *Tajung Pajang*, where *tajung* refers to a stretch of land and *pajang* denotes something wide or extensive. This name reflects the area's geography, characterized by vast rice fields that historically served as the community's main farmland and primary source of livelihood. Agricultural activities shaped the community's socio-economic identity, with daily life closely tied to cultivation cycles. Within the descriptive toponymic category, these naming practices demonstrate that Rejang village names are deeply connected to language, natural landscapes, and local culture, embodying cultural values, local wisdom, and the community's worldview regarding the relationship between humans and nature.

#### Category of Action/Event

In remembering past events or actions, place names serve as one means by which local communities preserve collective experience, and village names in the Rejang language reflect a clear pattern of formation based on such events or actions. This is evident in villages such as *Dan Bijea*, *Ujen Mas*, and *Taba Beleu*. *Dan Bijea* derives from *dan*, meaning to stop or rest briefly, and *bijea*, referring to the *binjai* fruit; according to local accounts, the area once functioned as an important resting point for residents and traders engaged in socio-economic activities, marked by the presence of a large *binjai* tree that provided shade and served as a natural landmark. *Ujen Mas* originates in an orally transmitted account of Haji Agus Malik and his wife, in which a drop (ujen) falling from a spout was believed to be made of gold (mas), an experience regarded as sacred and later institutionalized as the village name. Meanwhile, *Taba Beleu* reflects land-clearing practices, where *taba* means "to cut or slash" and *beleu* means "new," referring to newly opened land for livelihood and highlighting human activity as the basis of place naming. Within this event/action category, Rejang village names such as *Dan Bijea*, *Ujen Mas*, and *Taba Beleu* demonstrate how historical actions and experiences are embedded in language and preserved through toponyms, functioning not only as geographical labels but also as markers of collective identity, social memory, cultural values, and the community's enduring connection to their living space.

#### C. Loss of Cultural and Historical Heritage of the Village

Based on interviews with informants from both younger and older generations, including customary leaders from each village in Kepahiang Regency, there is evidence of a potential decline in the transmission of cultural heritage and village history among the younger generation of native Rejang speakers.

TABLE 4  
MAPPING OF THE POTENTIAL LOSS OF VILLAGE CULTURE AND HISTORY

| Potential Loss | Age | Quotes                                                                                                          | Youth Involvement |
|----------------|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Positive       | 58  | "Young people do not know" (Interviewee CD)                                                                     | Low               |
| Positive       | 75  | "I no longer know. Even though it is important for us to know the village's history" (Interviewee S)            | Low               |
| Positive       | 60  | "In general, they only know what is happening now, but they do not know what actually happened" (Interviewee K) | Low               |
| Positive       | 27  | "I'm not very familiar with it, because I rarely hear the story directly." – Interviewee L                      | Low               |
| Positive       | 24  | "I feel that the village names are no longer very familiar among the younger generation." – Interviewee I       | Low               |

Based on Table 4, informants from the older generation, particularly customary leaders, highlighted difficulties in preserving and transmitting the history and culture embedded in village names. Statements such as *"The young do not know"* (Interviewee CD, September 2025) and *"Generally, they know something now, but they do not know what it actually is"* (Interviewee K, September 2025) indicate low engagement of the younger generation in understanding the origins and meanings of village toponyms. Similar perceptions were also expressed by younger informants, for example, *"I'm not very familiar with it, because I rarely hear the story directly"* (Interviewee L, December 2025), suggesting limited exposure to intergenerational storytelling. This condition reflects a shift in cultural values and patterns of knowledge transmission, in which oral tradition is no longer the primary medium for passing down local history and culture. Social change, modernization, and the renaming of villages from Rejang to Indonesian further intensify this disruption. *From a toponymic perspective, the loss of understanding of place-name meanings weakens collective identity*, as village names encapsulate historical memory, cultural values, and local worldviews. The situation becomes more complex due to the language shift in village naming practices, which is not merely administrative but also reduces younger generations' interest in engaging with their cultural heritage. *This phenomenon aligns with Fishman's (1991) concept of language and cultural attrition*, whereby the weakening of a local language's function leads to the gradual erosion of linguistic identity and cultural continuity.

#### D. Community Perception

The interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify recurring patterns and themes related to community perceptions of village name changes from Rejang to Indonesian. Participants were recruited from each village, with four to five individuals representing both younger (16–30 years) and older generations (40–75 years), ensuring intergenerational perspectives. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research standards for achieving data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Based on this analytical framework, community perceptions were categorized into three main perspectives: (1) cultural identity as inherited through lineage, (2) village names as markers of ecological and cultural identity, and (3) a pragmatic perspective that views Indonesian as a more effective language for social and administrative communication.

TABLE 5  
COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

| Quotes                                                                                                                                                                       | Interpretation                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "Although the name has changed, its sacred power will continue to be passed down from generation to generation to the descendants of Tanjung Balai." — Interviewee A         | The community responded to this name change by stating that it does not affect the values held by the village.                                                                 |
| "Because remembering the origin of the village name greatly influences customs and history, and successors are needed for the continuity of culture." — Interviewee L        | The importance of remembering the original name of a village lies in the fact that by recalling its history, customs, and cultural continuity can be preserved for the future. |
| "I agree if the village name is restored to its original form. Because with the original name, the community will be united with the nature of the village." — Interviewee D | The community considers it important to preserve the village name as a form of identity and to protect the natural environment in which they live.                             |
| "If the name of this village changes, then its identity will automatically be lost." — Interviewee M                                                                         | The view of the village name as an identity is strong within the community, underscoring the importance of preserving the area's original name.                                |
| "However, village names do not necessarily have to use the Rejang language, because Indonesian is already widely understood by people." — Interviewee Q                      | Another perspective within the community holds that the original language is less important than the national language, Indonesian.                                            |

The first perspective, held by traditional leaders, maintains the belief that sacred powers or ancestral values will continue to be inherited. This reflects the Rejang community's cosmological view, which places cultural identity as a genealogically transmitted entity. Such identity is not only associated with the linguistic symbol of the village name in the Rejang language but is also transmitted across generations of descendants of *Tanjung Balai* Village.

The second perspective shows that the village name functions as a cultural and ecological identity marker. For this group, preserving the village name is equivalent to maintaining collective memory and keeping it connected to history, place, and inherited value systems. Maintaining the original village name in the local language is vital to cultural preservation and to sustaining residents' sense of identity.

The third perspective represents a new direction in understanding identity, where informants exhibit a more pragmatic and modernist attitude. They demonstrate different language behaviors, viewing the use of Indonesian as more effective in social and administrative contexts. This view indicates that, socially, the Rejang language is no longer seen as an effective medium for conveying broader purposes or intentions.

In general, Rejang traditional leaders demonstrate a point of negotiation between preserving local identity and adapting to modernity. For some, maintaining the village name in the Rejang language remains essential as a marker of identity, while others regard the change of village names as natural and part of integrating into a wider social system.

## V. DISCUSSION

This study critically examines the shift in village names in Kepahiang Regency from Rejang to Indonesian, focusing on referential meanings and community perceptions. The findings show that these changes have significantly affected linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions, positioning toponymy as a site of social change shaped by language policy and modernization (Putra & Winarti, 2025). By integrating semantic and thematic analyses with cross-generational interview data, this study demonstrates that village names function not merely as administrative labels but as cultural signs that preserve historical values and the Rejang worldview. These findings align with previous studies showing that place names reflect local landscapes and cultural identities, such as those observed in the Li language of Hainan Island (Zhang et al., 2025). Similarly, in Indonesia, village names in Aceh often derive from geographical features, heritage structures, ancestral origins, and historical events, all of which reflect a rich cultural identity (Aziz et al., 2025). Meanwhile, in Cape Coast, Ghana, indigenous place names reveal the complex dynamics of culture, geography, identity, and power, turning the city into a living archive with historical relevance (Nkansah & Bonsu, 2024).

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that language shift can directly alter the referential meaning of Rejang-language village toponyms. Village names in Rejang often reference natural elements, historical events, legendary figures, and shared experiences of the Rejang community. However, when these names are translated into Indonesian, their original referents are often lost, and some names undergo lexical simplification. These findings align with the view that place names represent local knowledge and human relationships with space (Ainabek et al., 2024; Cacciafoco & Cavallaro, 2023) and reinforce the argument that changes in toponymy can sever the connection between language, history, and cultural identity (Seethal, 2007; Gálvez, 2024).

The meaning shift also reflects intergenerational differences in perception. Older generations view village names as representing ancestral and genealogical identity, while younger generations increasingly lack understanding of their origins and historical meanings. This indicates a weakening of intergenerational cultural transmission, consistent with language and cultural attrition (Fishman, 1991) and supports findings that national language dominance can displace local languages and affect cultural identity (Abtahian et al., 2022).

The implications of this study can be divided into three areas: linguistic, cultural, and policy. Linguistically, the shift of village names from Rejang to Indonesian is not neutral, as it obscures semantic references and diminishes cultural meaning. Culturally, these changes weaken collective memory and the local sense of belonging. From a policy perspective, toponymy should be managed in a participatory manner, involving indigenous communities and recognizing local languages within administrative systems, with support for education to ensure cultural continuity. In addition, the theoretical implications of such research can enrich studies in sociolinguistics and toponymy, as well as areal linguistics. The findings can also be integrated into courses on historical geography, linguistic geography, and comparative linguistics (Konyratbayeva et al., 2025). Furthermore, they can be applied in language teaching and social sciences to foster a deeper awareness of cultural identity and linguistic worldviews (Zhunussova et al., 2025).

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the change of village names in Kepahiang Regency from Rejang to Indonesian was not merely an administrative adjustment but also a sociolinguistic transformation, particularly with respect to semantics, culture, and intergenerational aspects. When the names of villages in the Rejang language in Kepahiang Regency were translated into Indonesian, most meanings related to ecology, historical experiences, legends, and even the community's collective memory were simplified or lost. This research also identified a generational gap: the older generation tends to interpret village names as symbols of ancestral identity, whereas the younger generation has less understanding of their historical meanings. This situation certainly indicates a weakening of cultural transmission amid the community's efforts to negotiate local identity with the demands of modern governance.

More broadly, this study confirms that toponymy is a dynamic social practice shaped by language policy, modernization, and power relations. In other words, preserving Rejang toponymy is important for maintaining the community's cultural identity and collective memory. These findings also emphasize the existence of place-naming policies capable of preserving culture, ensuring that local languages and the traditional values they carry remain recognized and sustainable. Thus, further research is expected to deepen the study of the role of government policy and administrative practices in assisting changes in Rejang language toponymy. In addition, involving a larger, more diverse sample will provide a deeper understanding of how village name changes are interpreted in everyday life. Comparative

studies of regions that still preserve regional language toponymy are also very important for evaluating policy directions and their implications for social and cultural justice in Indonesia.

#### DECLARATION OF THE USE OF AI

In preparing this article, the authors used ChatGPT (version 4.0) solely to assist with language polishing, including improving grammar, correcting spelling, and adjusting the text to an academic style. The authors also used AI tools for English translation under the strict supervision of the author team. In addition, AI-based tools, such as Scopus AI, were used to identify relevant literature on the research topic. All analyses and the preparation of the academic manuscript were conducted entirely by the authors, with careful attention to academic standards and ethical guidelines.

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