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Preserving Language, Resolving Conflict: Insights from Aceh and Patani

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Abstract

The preservation of local languages is critical in conflict-affected regions. Yet, a significant gap exists in comparative analysis exploring how divergent political settlements—post-conflict settlement versus ongoing conflict—shape language preservation strategies and outcomes. This study investigates how the de-securitization of language in Aceh, Indonesia, versus the ongoing language securitization in Patani, Thailand, produces fundamentally different strategies and challenges for revitalization. Employing a comparative case study methodology, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 stakeholders across both regions, performed non-participatory observation, and analyzed policy documents. Our findings reveal that Aceh's formal recognition is undermined by implementation gaps, leading to institutional decay, while Patani's grassroots efforts are constrained by state suspicion, fostering a model of community resilience. The study concludes that the state's political decision to (de)securitize a minority language is the pivotal factor determining whether preservation efforts can achieve sustainable, institutionalized vitality beyond mere survival. This research offers a nuanced model for understanding the state's central role in peacebuilding (SDG 16) through linguistic diversity, providing vital insights for language preservation strategies in other multilingual, conflict-affected regions.

Keywords: *(De)Securitization; Language Preservation; Language Policy; Political Decision (SDG 16).*

A. Introduction

States often use language as a tool for nation-building and assimilation. By promoting a single national language, they aim to forge what Anderson (1991) terms an "imagined community." This language homogenization is typically achieved through deliberate language-planning policies aimed at creating a unified identity (Wright, 2004; Qassrawi & al Karasneh, 2025).

In conflict zones, this dynamic intensifies dramatically. Language can be "securitized"—viewed by the state as a threat linked to separatism—leading to what Lo Bianco (2019) terms "linguistic grievance." This securitization often results in assimilationist policies that, according to scholars of linguistic human rights (SDG 16), violate the fundamental rights of minority communities (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995; Zainullah, 2023; Haltsova et al., 2024). For minority groups, a local language is more than a medium of communication; it often represents a non-negotiable pillar of identity that a community will mobilize to defend. Their struggle against state pressures to maintain this value is central to what Fishman (1991) famously framed as the effort to "reverse language shift."

The diverse post-colonial trajectories of Southeast Asia states, rooted in national unity, offer crucial backdrops for language dynamics (Ng et al., 2025; Abdullah et al., 2024). While all faced the challenge of uniting ethnolinguistically complex populations, Indonesia and Thailand developed different official stances. Language policies, involving "status" (selecting official roles) and "corpus planning" (standardization), have been central to nation-building, with outcomes ranging from heavily monolingual to multilingual (Simpson, 2021; Wu, Y., & Othman, J., 2025). However, top-down planning often meets bottom-up resistance or adaptation. Recent scholarship shows that NGOs and communities frequently drive preservation initiatives rather than state action (Maliwat, 2021). This theoretical framing on political regimes and their impact on *de jure* recognition and *de facto* restrictions is particularly relevant for understanding the contrasting policy landscapes in Aceh and Patani.

This study, therefore, investigates how the divergent political settlements in Aceh (post-conflict autonomy/de-securitization) and Patani (ongoing conflict/securitization) fundamentally shape the strategies and challenges of local language revitalization, with broader implications for peacebuilding policy. Ultimately, this research aims to understand how formal policies and community-led initiatives contribute to local

language preservation and to examine the key challenges faced by these efforts in Aceh, Indonesia, and in Patani, Thailand.

Indonesia, a vast ethnic landscape formalized by its motto '*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*' (Unity in Diversity), heavily promoted *Bahasa Indonesia* as a unifying lingua franca for nation-building (Sneddon, 2003; Situmorang & Pramusita, 2025). Malay/Indonesian was chosen as an ethnically neutral national language, implemented gradually without suppressing informal local language use (Chu & Le, 2020; Simpson, 2021), fostering 'nationwide bilingualism' (Indonesian for formal, local for informal) and avoiding ethnic conflict (Simpson, 2021; Situmorang & Pramusita, 2025).

The decades-long Aceh conflict (GAM vs. the Indonesian state) culminated in the 2005 Helsinki MoU, paving the way for post-conflict frameworks such as the 2022 Qanun Bahasa Aceh on special autonomy (Akmal & Masni, 2024; Abidin et al., 2025). The Qanun formally de-securitized Acehnese, transforming it from a symbol of rebellion into a recognized component of regional governance, removing its perceived threat status. However, policy-to-practice is complex: research highlights a persistent 'ethnolinguistic dilemma' (Manan et al., 2017) and significant implementation gaps, especially among urban youth (Collins, 2018). Consequently, Aceh's challenge is revitalization, not recognition, in a post-conflict environment where political will may wane.

In contrast, Thailand pursued overt ethno-nationalist assimilation, building its state around the "three pillars" of nation, religion (Theravada Buddhism), and monarchy, with Central Thai as the sole language of state and basic education (SDG 4). This monolingual framework led to policies that integrated peripheral regions like the Malay-speaking south, often viewing linguistic difference as a direct challenge to national sovereignty rather than as diversity, and to calls for linguistic autonomy, which were usually equated with separatism (McCargo, 2004; 2012). However, this created resentment in the Malay-speaking Muslim south due to heavy control over Malay-language education (Simpson, 2021), and recent state-led multilingual efforts are often viewed with suspicion as assimilationist (Draper, et al., 2019). This suspicion creates a hostile environment and is counterproductive to preservation aims.

While these rich bodies of literature on Aceh and Patani provide crucial insights into each case, they predominantly examine them in isolation. Consequently, a significant gap persists in the literature: a direct comparative analysis that juxtaposes these two cases to understand how differing political settlements—Aceh's post-conflict

special autonomy versus Patani's ongoing securitized conflict—produce fundamentally different challenges and strategies for language preservation. The novelty of this study, therefore, lies specifically in this comparative approach. By analyzing these divergent trajectories side-by-side, this research is theoretically positioned to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between state policy, political conflict, and community agency. It aims to contribute to the broader discourse on language preservation strategies, offering lessons for other conflict-affected societies navigating the intricate relationship between language, identity, and conflict.

B. Method

This study employs a comparative qualitative research approach to explore language preservation in Aceh, Indonesia, and Patani, Thailand. To navigate the sensitivities of these conflict-affected regions, the team utilized a strategic positionality framework. In Aceh, the Thai and Malay researchers led interviews to maintain neutrality, while Indonesian researchers facilitated trust. Conversely, in Patani, Indonesian researchers led data collection, while Thai and Malay researchers handled local safety and relationship-building.

The primary data source consisted of semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected stakeholders (n=10 per region) with expertise and direct involvement in language preservation efforts. These roles—including academics, cultural institution leaders, politicians, and civil society representatives (see Table 1). Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and was conducted across Aceh Province from May 24 to May 29, 2024, and in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces, Thailand, from July 7 to July 10, 2024.

Table 1. Informants' Details

Region	Participant Role	Number of Participants (n)
Aceh, Indonesia	Academics	5
	Leaders of cultural institutions	3
	Journalist	1
	Local Politician	1
Patani, Thailand	CSO Leaders	3
	Language Activists	3
	Academics	3
	Local Politician	1

In addition, data were also collected through non-participatory observation and document analysis. Non-participatory observation was conducted concurrently with the interview period in each region. It provided contextual understanding of language use and preservation activities, specifically focusing on public signage, media broadcasts, and informal interactions in marketplace and religious settings. Meanwhile, relevant documents, such as policy papers (e.g., Aceh's Qanun Bahasa Aceh), educational materials, and reports from language preservation initiatives were also systematically analyzed.

Analysis was performed using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach. Transcripts (Indonesian/Thai, translated to English) and documents were inductively open-coded to identify initial concepts. Initial open coding led to grouped themes (e.g., "state suspicion," "implementation gaps," "youth apathy," "religious resilience"), which were then cross-mapped to identify regional convergences and divergences. To ensure validity, the team employed data triangulation and intensive internal debriefing sessions.

This study adhered to rigorous social research ethics standards, prioritizing participants' safety in politically sensitive contexts. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all informants; this was intentionally prioritized over written signatures to protect participants from potential state surveillance or fear associated with signing official documents. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying details were redacted, and data were stored in encrypted files accessible only to the research team. The study design followed the principle of "Do No Harm," with researchers continuously assessing the political climate to mitigate risks to informants. No institutional affiliation was used to pressure participation, and all subjects were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

C. Results and Discussion

The preservation of local languages in conflict-affected regions, exemplified by Aceh (Indonesia) and Patani (Thailand), involves complex interactions among cultural resilience, political negotiation, and socio-ethnic identity. Both contexts highlight the dual role of language as a tool for unity and a marker of division, revealing achievements in cultural revitalization alongside persistent challenges in equitable policy implementation and intergroup cohesion. This section examines how these dynamics shape post-conflict and ongoing identity politics, as well as the

precarious balance between preservation and assimilation in linguistically diverse conflict zones.

1. Results

a. Language Preservation Efforts in Aceh

In Aceh, efforts to preserve its rich linguistic landscape, encompassing Acehnese and several other regional languages, stem from both formal governmental initiatives enabled by special autonomy and vibrant community-based actions.

Formal Policies and Government Initiatives

Post-conflict frameworks paved the way for specific policies, most notably the Qanun Bahasa Aceh ratified in 2022, under Aceh's special autonomy status. This regulation formally recognizes Aceh's 11 languages, mandating Acehnese use in official contexts, such as designated government days (e.g., Thursday, as per the Governor's Decree). Crucially, the Qanun provides for other ethnic regions, such as Gayo, to develop similar district-level language regulations, promoting inclusivity and mitigating conflict, as noted by a Qanun drafting scholar. These local policies align with broader support structures, including the Indonesian national constitution's mandate to preserve local languages and the provincial presence of the national Language Centre (*Balai Bahasa*), which has historically conducted activities such as teacher training in language instruction.

Some participants perceive formal governmental initiatives in Aceh positively. For example, a journalist in Banda Aceh noted the establishment of various bodies, including the Acehnese Traditional Assembly and the Aceh Education Assembly, as evidence of the government's sincere efforts in preserving the Acehnese language.

> *I think the government's efforts to preserve the Acehnese language have been good... We have the Aceh Customary Assembly, the Aceh Education Assembly, and also the Ulema Consultative Assembly, the Dayah Council, and the Islamic Sharia Council. I believe this is an effort by the government to maintain not only Islam but also Aceh's identity. (Interview with P10, May 2024).*

This perspective highlights the role of formal recognition in transforming language from a symbol of rebellion into a component of regional governance. More

importantly, this long-standing state recognition provides foundational legitimacy for Aceh's recent autonomy-driven policies.

Educational Policies and Initiatives

The education sector is another key arena for preservation policies. The national *Muatan Lokal* (Mulok) curriculum framework, which designates local content within the school curriculum, provides a designated space for teaching local languages in schools. However, its practical implementation relies on provincial and district follow-through. The Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia (ISBI) Aceh also recently began offering a Bahasa Aceh program. This institutionalization of language demonstrates an effort to prioritize the Acehnese language in the education of the younger generation in Aceh. However, a critical gap exists in preparing qualified Acehnese language teachers because the current program, still focuses solely on linguistics rather than on Acehnese education, as one informant recalls, "*[Those who teach Acehnese programs in ISBI] are from Indonesian and English linguistic backgrounds because we tend to focus on the linguistic, not the education," (Interview with P9, May 2024).*

Because of this, some informants hope that the Qanun will create a legal basis for local language instructors to earn teacher certification credits. Such a provision would potentially address a long-standing disincentive for teachers to specialize in these subjects. These contemporary efforts are not entirely new; they build on historical precedents, such as policies under Governor Ibrahim Hasan requiring the use of Acehnese or Malay scripts in official documents—a move seen as an assertion of cultural autonomy.

Community and Cultural Preservation

Alongside formal policies, a vibrant array of community and non-government efforts demonstrates the bedrock of actual language usage and vitality. Local languages remain primary in many communities, particularly rural areas like Pasee, supported by social norms and parental choice at home. Diaspora communities, such as in Sweden, actively teach Acehnese to their children.

The arts (music, traditional performances such as *Gayo Didong*, *Acehnese Saman,* and *Seudati;* literature such as *hikayat* and *nazam*) serve as powerful vehicles for language preservation. Traditional practices are also inherently linguistic. These include *adat* ceremonies (*peusijuk*), community meetings (*tuha peut/lapan*), and

wedding rituals (e.g., Gayo *Melengkan* poetry, Acehnese *serah terima linto/dara baro)*. Communities' events and projects further promote local languages, such as the *Melengkan* competition and the 'Grrr Aceh' book of conflict-era stories. Non-state actors also play a vital role. These include private schools that offer Acehnese instruction and community media such as Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI), Gayo programs in Takengon, and the "Harie" Gayo newspaper.

In addition to these community efforts, the provincial government actively supports language promotion through its own cultural programs. These government-led cultural events, while valuable, also reveal the inherent complexities of managing linguistic diversity in a multi-ethnic province. The framing of these initiatives can sometimes blur the lines between inclusive support and the reinforcement of the dominant regional language. For instance, one informant observed that while the government organized events like Acehnese speech and storytelling competitions, the 2023 Aceh Cultural Fair presented a more complex picture. During a writing competition, he reiterates, *"…there were Tamiang people who wrote in Tamiang languages, [but] it was still considered part of the Acehnese language initiative," (Interview with P5, May 2024)*.

This observation is critical because it highlights a potential tension within the preservation framework. While the inclusion of the Tamiang language is a positive step, subsuming it under an "Acehnese" banner risks inadvertently marginalizing smaller linguistic identities. It points to the challenge of creating a truly equitable language policy that gives equal status to all of Aceh's languages, rather than positioning Acehnese as the primary regional language with others as secondary beneficiaries.

b. Language Preservation Efforts in Patani

In Patani, preserving the Malay language faces complex socio-political challenges. It is heavily reliant on grassroots initiatives, particularly those linked to religious education, and navigates cautious, sometimes contradictory governmental stances. Unlike Aceh's more formalized autonomy-driven policies, Patani's efforts often appear reactive or community-led in response to perceived threats or neglect.

Governmental Stance and Media Role

Formal government policies towards Malay preservation are circumspect. Proactive promotion is limited; instead, the state utilizes Malay identity as 'soft

power' for cultural tourism. The activist articulated this distinction between the acceptable cultural form and the feared political content. He further explains, "*Malay as a culture is not a problem; the government uses Malay identity to promote as a soft power ... so the problem is political thought*" (Interview with P16, July 2024).

However, this cultural acknowledgment exists alongside political tensions. Efforts initiated by universities like Mahidol to teach Malay using the Thai alphabet were reportedly rejected by the community. While Non-Formal Education programs offer Malay courses, they are less popular than English courses, and though southern universities offer Malay curricula, a comprehensive, government-led strategy for widespread Malay-language education is absent. A senior Buddhist NGO activist explicitly states, *"I didn't see any initiative from the government [to preserve local language] beyond basic programs" (Interview with P13, July 2024)*.

Furthermore, the media plays a mixed role. Several community radio stations, often NGO-initiated, broadcast in local Malay and feature local and regional music. Significantly, there is also a 24-hour government-run radio station in Yala broadcasting entirely in Malay, indicating some level of official acceptance in this sphere. However, print media in Malay/Jawi is scarce, and past initiatives, such as a Jawi newspaper, have been short-lived due to funding constraints.

Role of Religious Institutions in Preservation

In Patani, a cornerstone of linguistic resilience lies within the community's educational structures, particularly the Tadika system. This system integrates language preservation with religious practice, as one community leader emphasizes, *"Using Malay in religious settings not only preserves the language but also strengthens our cultural and spiritual identity," (Interview with P18, July 2024)*.

Similarly, traditional *Pondok Pesantren,* Islamic boarding schools with a long history and significant cultural influence in the region, continue to utilize Jawi and Malay as the primary medium for religious instruction (*talaqqi*). These institutions represent a substantial, historically rooted effort to maintain linguistic continuity outside the state system.

Cultural Expression and Community Mobilization

Cultural expression also serves as a vital space for preservation. Youth engagement, reportedly increasing since the conflict intensified, finds an outlet in

events like the Melayu Raya festival. Organized by CSOs around Eid, this gathering uses only Malay for its music, speeches, and performances, making a clear statement about linguistic identity. Consequently, the festival has faced government scrutiny and suspicion due to perceived political undertones and incidents such as the appearance of Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) flags. One informant recalled:

> *For the first year, the event ran smoothly. In the second year, the government tried to stop it by pressing charges against the organizer, because the government said that they were using dangerous words such as Merdeka (Independent). Another issue is the participants waving the Patani Flag (BRN flag). (Interview with P20, July 2024).*

Other examples of such initiatives include the Kenduri Seni Patani Artspace, which utilizes contemporary art and multiple languages to explore local issues, including conflict and identity, fostering dialogue through cultural exchange. Additionally, Tadika schools often organize annual events featuring Malay speech, singing, and poetry contests. These efforts demonstrate how community mobilization through cultural arts has become a reliable instrument for language preservation in an ongoing conflict region like Patani.

c. Challenges Faced by Aceh in Preserving Regional Languages

Despite the existence of formal policies such as the Qanun Bahasa Aceh, significant challenges hinder the practical preservation of the language in the region. From the government's side, a key problem is the lack of political will to consistently enforce the language policy, which makes implementation unsustainable. From the community's side, a pre-existing preference for Bahasa Indonesia undermines efforts to reverse the language shift.

Implementation Gaps and Institutional Inertia

While the Qanun Bahasa Aceh acknowledges the importance of Acehnese, the policy lacks the necessary instruments for effective implementation. A primary issue is a shortage of qualified Acehnese language teachers and dedicated training and incentive programs for those teaching the language. As one informant notes, *"The problems faced [in Acehnese language preservation] are a shortage of qualified Acehnese language teachers. This is due to the previous delay in efforts to preserve and develop the Acehnese language," (Interview with P9, May 2024).*

This lack of trained personnel makes integrating local languages into the curriculum, as envisioned by the Mulok framework, complex in practice. Furthermore, the absence of a clear procedure for Acehnese teachers' certification makes the profession seem unattractive. One informant explains the dilemma:

> *Acehnese language teachers are currently not recognized for certification requirements; they are forced to teach other subjects instead. That's why, in the end, no one wants to teach the Acehnese language – why go to all that trouble if it's not acknowledged?. (Interview with P5, May 2024).*

Informants also highlighted the Qanun's somewhat 'arbitrary' nature, as it lacks strong enforcement mechanisms or sanctions for non-implementation. One participant emphasizes, "*The problem is that even though [the Qanun exists], the use of Acehnese is free or arbitrary, meaning there are no penalties or salary cuts for not using it" (Interview with P9, May 2024)*. Another participant questioned its very purpose, stating, *"What is the Qanun exactly? If it's a rule, are there sanctions if it's not followed? If there are no sanctions, then what's the point?" (Interview P8, May 2024)*.

The absence of accountability measures points to a broader challenge: a lack of necessary tools and follow-through from authorities regarding preservation mandates. Past efforts, such as the development of an Acehnese curriculum, were not accompanied by clear incentives. Additionally, initiatives like designating Thursday for Acehnese use are reportedly not consistently monitored or evaluated.

Shifting Language Attitudes and Intergenerational Transmission

Another significant challenge lies in prevailing language attitudes, particularly among the younger, urban generation. Several participants noted a tendency for youth to prefer Bahasa Indonesia or English, viewing them as more prestigious or modern, while perceiving Acehnese sometimes as "*kampungan*" (backward). This stigmatization of the local language contributes to what an academician described as "language inferiority" (Interview with P2, May 2024), characterized by a lack of confidence in the mother tongue. An academician explicitly linked this phenomenon to the historical pressures of the conflict, suggesting an internalized cultural devaluation analogous to a "*'black skin, white mask' mentality, where external cultural influences lead to the perceived inferiority of local practices and languages," (Interview with P1, May 2024)*.

The lack of internal motivation and enthusiasm from the Acehnese to teach and speak their mother language at home is another frustrating trend. One linguistics lecturer expressed deep frustration with what he saw as a contradiction, noting that while Acehnese people say they *"want to preserve Acehnese... they teach their children Indonesian, and then blame others" (Interview with P6, May 2024)*. This discrepancy between rhetoric and practice highlights a key challenge: the desire to preserve the language exists, but it often clashes with the demands of modern life, which favor the dominant language. For example, parents frequently prioritize Indonesian because they believe that mastering it offers their children better educational and career opportunities. This reluctance to use Acehnese consistently at home directly undermines grassroots transmission of the language to the next generation.

Resource and Standardization Issues

Finally, resource and standardization issues present practical barriers. Beyond teacher shortages, Aceh lacks a single, universally adopted standardized grammar and orthography for Acehnese, which is further complicated by competing spelling systems.

> *We have 12 ethnicities, and some areas where the majority speaks Acehnese have different dialects. ... The Acehnese language we learned for the first time was Acehnese with the Bireuen dialect. This is because Bireuen was an area of intellectual movement in the early 19th century, so the intellectual language at that time was the Acehnese dialect of Bireuen. (Interview with P7, May 2024).*

The linguistic diversity of Aceh itself adds another layer of complexity. For the other languages recognized by the Qanun, such as Gayo and Tamiang, the implementation challenges faced by Acehnese are often magnified. These smaller linguistic communities contend with even more acute shortages of qualified teachers, a near-total lack of standardized educational materials, and less political leverage to secure resources, as P12 questions: "*Even if the study program is opened, sometimes the lecturer is not there. For example, a lecturer in Gayo Language, where will the lecturer get a Gayo Language certificate to be able to become a lecturer?" (Interview with P12, May 2024).*

Hence, the challenges are also qualitatively different; these groups must navigate the preservation of their unique identity not only in relation to the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia but also within a province-wide policy framework

that can, at times, appear centered on the Acehnese language, risking inadvertent marginalization.

d. Challenges Faced by Patani in Preserving Regional Languages

The preservation of the Malay language in Patani confronts distinct challenges deeply rooted in the region's political context and its historical relationship with the Thai state.

State Suspicion and Securitization of Language

One significant challenge is the negative perception and persistent suspicion toward the Malay language, particularly from state actors. As a senior Buddhist NGO activist articulates, "*There are sentiments [against] learning the Malay language because they think that learning the Malay language is going to be like [supporting] separatists," (Interview with P13, July 2024)*.

This sentiment has deep historical roots, as recalled by a community leader: "*stemming from assimilationist policies under figures like Marshall Por Phibunsongkhram, and manifests today in government hesitancy to actively promote the language beyond passive tolerance" (Interview with P16, July 2024)*. Consequently, the language has become an object of suspicion and securitization, where "*in the view of the civilian and military governments, they see Malay identity [the language] as a danger to the security of the Thai kingdom," (Interview with P20, July 2024)*. As a result, meaningful government preservation efforts are unlikely to be forthcoming, as the local language is fundamentally viewed as a security threat rather than a cultural right.

This complex interplay between language and perceived political threat makes Malay language preservation in Patani an especially fraught and challenging endeavor. The tension also affects practical challenges in formal settings. For instance, in ongoing peace negotiations, the reported refusal of BRN representatives to speak Thai necessitates complex translation arrangements, demonstrating how language choice remains a potent symbol of resistance and distrust.

Dominance of Thai and Educational Challenges

This political backdrop contributes to the dominance of the Thai language in key societal domains. Thai is the primary language of education, government administration, and perceived economic opportunity. Consequently, Malay usage is

declining, especially among urban youth who increasingly favor Thai. One participant lamented that Malay is increasingly seen as a "foreign language" by younger generations. "*Everyone, including students, is fluent in Thai and has poor (strange) Malay. Now, Malay here is like a foreign language. The youth have started to feel that Malay is a foreign language, not a language connected to their instincts," (Interview with P14, July 2024).*

The education system reinforces this language shift; even in subsidized religious schools (*sekolah agama swasta*), Thai is often the medium of instruction, including for religious subjects, pushing Malay further to the margins. As a community leader observed, this system makes it difficult for *Pondok Pesantrens that retain* Jawi/Malay to compete. They noted that, through gradual, evolutionary coercion, religious schools receiving government subsidies are forced to use Thai as the medium of instruction. This policy extends even to schools receiving partial funding. Consequently, the leader explained, traditional *pondok* schools are struggling to survive on their own, finding they "*won't be able to compete with other schools*" because the mandatory use of Thai in both the academic and religious streams ensures that "*students automatically speak Thai*" (Interview with P14, July 2024).

The combined pressures of government subsidy requirements and economic opportunity have successfully established Thai as the language of success, effectively turning the educational domain into an instrument of assimilation. This linguistic and economic hegemony leaves traditional Malay-medium institutions, such as the *Pondok* schools, isolated and struggling to compete. Their very survival thus hinges not only on community effort but also on their ability to resist a state framework that structurally penalizes the maintenance of the Patani Malay language and identity.

Standardization and Institutional Gaps

The issue of standardization presents a critical internal barrier, hindering the development of cohesive language policy and educational resources. As highlighted by a journalist and another activist, there is "*no system for the Patani Malay language*" (Interviews with P16 and P20, 2024) for a standardized written form. This lack of a unified orthography leads to ongoing debates within the community: should they align with Malaysian or Indonesian Malay standards, or adhere to the language of older religious texts (*kitab lama*, which represent a distinct historical and linguistic tradition within the community and pose unique challenges for modern standardization?

Furthermore, there is contention over prioritizing the Jawi (Arabic-derived) script versus the Rumi (Roman) script. This script debate is highly political: Jawi is deeply associated with the traditional, religious, and historical identity of Patani Muslims, while Rumi is often favored for its perceived modernity and alignment with the standardized Malay used in neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia.

The lack of an official body, such as a *Dewan Bahasa* (Language Council), to resolve these issues means that standardization efforts, such as the CSO-led dictionary project, remain fragmented and lack official backing. This absence of a standard hinders the creation of consistent teaching materials and makes formal instruction difficult. A politician aptly summarizes the frustration, *"...it's funny when the Melayu Nationalists always say 'Hilang Bahasa hilang bangsa' (To lose one's language is to lose one's identity/nation), but they don't know how to preserve language," (Interview with P17, July 2024)*. The resulting difficulty in producing consistent resources ensures that the language remains limited to oral, informal domains, hindering its capacity to secure a visible and institutionalized future.

e. Comparative Summary of Language Preservation Efforts and Challenges

To provide a clearer comparative overview of language preservation efforts and challenges in Aceh and Patani, Table 2 synthesizes the key findings across thematic areas for both regions.

Table 2. Language Preservation Efforts and Challenges in Aceh and Patani

Feature/Theme	Aceh, Indonesia (Post-Conflict Autonomy/De-securitization)	Patani, Thailand (Ongoing Conflict/Securitization)
State Policy Stance	Formal recognition (Qanun Bahasa Aceh, constitutional mandate) and de-securitization of Acehnese from a symbol of rebellion to a regional governance component.	Deeply securitized by the state, viewed as a threat linked to separatism, and subject to strong state control in education.
Government Initiatives	Mandated official use (e.g., one day/week); provisions for other regional languages (Gayo); dedicated institutions (MAA, Aceh Education Council); and funding for research/dictionaries.	Limited direct state initiatives beyond basic programs; some dual-language signage; a government-run Malay radio station (Yala); and attempts to teach Malay via Thai script, though largely rejected.
Education Policy	Mulok curriculum framework; ISBI Aceh program (not teacher training specific); and historical	Dominance of Thai in formal education, including subsidized religious schools; low levels of

Feature/Theme	Aceh, Indonesia (Post-Conflict Autonomy/De-securitization)	Patani, Thailand (Ongoing Conflict/Securitization)
	use of Acehnese reading materials in schools.	Non-Formal Education Malay courses;
Community Initiatives	Vibrant community-based efforts, esp. Rural; use in traditional practices/ceremonies; diaspora involvement; arts (music, performances, literature); private schools and local media; and documenting local narratives (Grrr Aceh project).	Heavily reliant on grassroots efforts with religious institutions (Tadika, Pondok Pesantren) are de facto guardians; cultural festivals (Melayu Raya) and art spaces (Kenduri Seni Patani Artspace); community radio stations; and CSO-led dictionary/ spelling guide projects.
Language Attitudes (Youth)	Shifting attitudes: preference for Bahasa Indonesia or English; perception of Acehnese as "*kampungan*" (backward): "Language inferiority"; and lack of internal motivation to teach/ speak at home, prioritizing Indonesian for education and economic prospects.	Declining Malay usage, increasing preference for Thai (urban youth); Malay feeling like a "foreign language" to younger generations; and use of Malay by insurgent groups as political resistance and distrust.
Standardization Issues	Lack of a single, universally adopted standardized grammar/orthography for Acehnese (competing systems); insufficiency of quality teaching materials; limited dedicated Acehnese media outlets; and challenges magnified for smaller languages within Aceh.	Debates over alignment with Malaysian/Indonesian Malay standards vs. *kitab lama*, contention over Jawi vs. Rumi script, and lack of official Dewan Bahasa.
Political Dynamics	Post-conflict de-securitization; formal autonomy; language becomes a component of regional governance; and risk of political will waning for implementation.	Ongoing conflict; language deeply securitized; calls for autonomy equated with separatism; and Malay used as a symbol of resistance in negotiations.

2. Discussion

This study has revealed how the preservation of local languages in Aceh and Patani follows two distinct trajectories shaped by their divergent political contexts: Aceh's post-conflict decentralization versus Patani's ongoing ethno-political conflict. Drawing on the Copenhagen School's framework on securitization (Waever, 1993), the analysis shows that while both the Indonesian and Thai states employ a strategy of official monolingualism, the implications of these policies differ dramatically based

on how state security (focused on sovereignty) and societal security (focused on identity) are constructed and negotiated. In Indonesia, the adoption of Bahasa Indonesia as a neutral lingua franca and the formal recognition of local languages post-conflict represent a form of de-securitization. Conversely, in Thailand, the elevation of Central Thai as a singular national identity marker, alongside the complexities facing Patani Malay, illustrates an ongoing process of securitization in which linguistic diversity is viewed through the lens of state sovereignty.

State security, in linguistic terms, is actualized through the prioritization of a single language. This preference, inherent to an official multilingual environment, establishes a hierarchical system that positions the dominant language as the medium of government, science, and high culture (Roche, 2019; Haslinger, 2022; Qassrawi & al Karasneh, 2025). Both the Indonesian and Thai governments use this approach, mandating a single official language across all sectors of society. However, the outcomes derived from this strategy differ significantly.

Unlike Thai, which is the mother tongue of the numerically dominant ethnic group, Bahasa Indonesia was historically a *lingua franca* in the Indonesian archipelago. The language, derived from Malay, was deliberately chosen because it was not identified with the majority Javanese ethnic group or any other major indigenous group. Selecting a minority-origin language was a strategic decision (Jiang et al., 2025), as Malay was then the principal lingua franca among the archipelago's hundreds of languages, despite only 5 percent of the population being native speakers at that time (Sneddon, 2003). By adopting this politically neutral language, the state effectively asserted its control without overtly privileging any single dominant ethnic identity. Consequently, this minimized potential internal conflicts that might have threatened sovereignty and fostered Bahasa Indonesia's function as a major unifying force.

Conversely, prioritizing Thai as an official language privileges the linguistic capital of the majority ethnic group, particularly when minority languages are simultaneously restricted. In Thailand, this prioritization negatively impacts minority languages such as Malay in Patani, where it is overtly excluded from the definition of the national identity. Patani Malay is relegated to the lowest stratum of the Thai language hierarchy (Huebner, 2019; Yunariono, 2025). This structural marginalization is critically reinforced by deep-seated societal prejudice, with Draper et al.'s (2019) study demonstrating that Thai society exhibits persistently high levels of racial and ethnic prejudice compared to international norms.

Within the ongoing conflict area of Patani, the use of the local language is viewed as inextricably linked to the insurgency, perceived as establishing an apparent "us versus them" dichotomy that separates the Malay-speaking Muslim population from the Thai Buddhist majority. Language, in this context, functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a powerful marker of collective identity, political loyalty, and resistance. The state's imperative to preserve its sovereignty thus drives the securitization of the Patani minority's social identity, whereby cultural and linguistic expressions are interpreted through a security lens rather than as legitimate manifestations of diversity (Hama, 2022).

This securitizing logic is institutionalized through official state practices. The Thai government has exerted symbolic and administrative pressure by refusing to accept "Malay" as an ethno-linguistic label for the group, instead promoting homogenizing national identifiers that erase linguistic distinctiveness (Huebner, 2019). As a result, the public use of Malay is framed not as a cultural right but as a political act, associated with separatism and framed as an existential threat to state security (Hama, 2022; Salman, 2024). This framing not only delegitimizes the language in formal and public domains but also reinforces mistrust between the state and the local population, further entrenching the conflict dynamic. Consequently, language becomes a site of contestation where everyday linguistic practices are imbued with political risk, constraining possibilities for inclusive governance and peaceful accommodation.

Conversely, Indonesia employed a different approach in the post-conflict aftermath. By tolerating local languages in private spheres (homes, religious life, traditional ceremonies) and authorizing their use in local subjects' schools, the state effectively de-securitizes the issue of ethnic identity, removing the automatic perception that indigenous culture poses a direct threat to state stability. The state maintains the official language without mandating the eradication of local languages.

As a consequence, the contrasting approaches to language policy are fundamentally shaped by their distinct conflict dynamics. In an ongoing conflict area, language issues approach a zero-sum calculus, where empowering one language is perceived as necessitating the decline of the other. In the post-conflict reconstruction of Aceh, the violence subsided into a political settlement that established a consensual framework where shared legal and political interests facilitate power-sharing and enable agreements on sensitive language issues.

Then, how does societal security manifest in language-related issues in ongoing and post-conflict areas? In Aceh, formal state recognition of the local language provides the foundational legitimacy for identity maintenance, thereby achieving language security. Such formal recognition represents a variant of societal security defined by the unlimited opportunity to use one's preferred language and the guarantee that its status will persist within the political system (Haslinger, 2022; Qassrawi & al Karasneh, 2025).

In Patani, the local community's societal security manifests primarily as a defensive response to state-led assimilation. Identity preservation relies on non-state actors and local religious educational institutions (like *Pondok* and Tadika systems) functioning as *de facto* guardians of the language. However, these defense mechanisms are interpreted through the framework of the 'societal security dilemma': *"measures that one side takes to defend its societal security (strengthen its identity) are misperceived by another as a threat to its own identity"* (Roe, 2002).

Furthermore, the divergence in preservation paths involves a dynamic between top-down state policy and bottom-up community agency. While grassroots resilience is crucial, the state's official stance on language securitization or de-securitization remains the primary determinant of the preservation trajectory. In Aceh, the post-conflict special autonomy formalizes the de-securitization of the Acehnese language. The official ideology of multiculturalism was translated into supportive management through the Qanun Bahasa Aceh. While this successfully transformed the language from a symbol of rebellion into a recognized component of regional governance, empirical evidence shows that *de jure* recognition is critically undermined by insufficient sustained implementation, leading to bureaucratic inertia.

This failure in the management prong means that, despite formal support, the language remains vulnerable to negative social attitudes, such as "language inferiority," particularly among youth. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the absence of robust 'voice and choice' mechanisms within the educational system, preventing the full flourishing of bilingualism in practice despite *de jure* recognition (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Yunariono, 2019). This struggle highlights how sociopolitical and economic structures lead many minority families to adopt a pragmatic calculus, favoring the dominant language at home for immediate goals, such as perceived better educational and career opportunities (Aghblagh & Rajabi, 2023; Sallabank & Austin, 2023).

Conversely, Patani exemplifies active language securitization (Lo Bianco, 2019). The Thai state's ideology links the Malay language directly to separatism, dictating a management strategy of surveillance and containment (Huebner, 2019). The state's "soft power" approach—tolerating the language as a de-politicized cultural artifact for tourism—is a deliberate tactic to neutralize its potential as a vehicle for political mobilization. This governmental fear of accommodation is empirically justified by the recognition paradox in conflict settings: while groups become satisfied with state services provided in their language, this satisfaction does not translate to increased political trust in state institutions; instead, the limited recognition further increases subsequent demands in language policy (Oztürk & Oztürk, 2023; na Thalang, 2023).

In this overtly hostile environment, preservation relies on pure community resilience. The community anchors the Malay language to Islam, ensuring its survival through non-state religious institutions, a pattern commonly observed in endangered language contexts where state support is absent (Awal, 2024). However, lacking any state support, these grassroots efforts struggle to penetrate the higher-status domains of formal education, government, or mass media, thereby obstructing upward linguistic mobility. Similar limitations have been documented in minority language revitalization efforts that rely heavily on informal and educational spaces without sustained institutional backing (Karabacak, 2025). This exclusion from public spheres perpetuates a linguistic habitus among Patani Malay speakers that, while robust in informal and religious contexts, lacks the institutional recognition needed to be equal to the dominant Thai linguistic order, a condition frequently associated with uneven or absent multilingual policy implementation (Rusdiansyah et al., 2025).

This comparative analysis constructs a clearer model for understanding language preservation in conflict zones. Formal recognition, as seen in Aceh, is a necessary but insufficient condition for revitalization; without robust and consistent implementation, it can become a hollow policy, as widely observed in multilingual governance frameworks (Rusdiansyah et al., 2025). However, this "institutional decay" creates fundamentally different—and arguably more manageable—challenges than the situation in Patani, where state suspicion mandates preservation as a mode of pure survival (Awal, 2024). The comparison demonstrates that the political act of de-securitizing a minority language is the critical first step in moving from a community-led struggle for survival to a collaborative project of sustainable revitalization, aligning

with securitization theory on minority rights and desecuritization processes (Roe, 2004). States should respond to security challenges not by further marginalizing minorities (securitization), but by giving even greater attention to minority rights, including linguistic rights (Roe, 2004; Abdrakhmanov, 2023).

While this study provides deep, systemic insights into language preservation, it acknowledges several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the research focused on 20 key stakeholders and experts to achieve data saturation on policy and institutional frameworks; consequently, it does not fully represent the linguistic population of Aceh and Patani. Second, the sensitivity of the conflict contexts and the necessary reliance on verbal consent may have influenced the degree of openness among some informants, despite the research team's positionality strategies. Finally, as a qualitative comparative study, these findings are context-specific and not intended for broad statistical generalization across all conflict-affected linguistic minorities.

D. Conclusion

This comparative study of Aceh and Patani demonstrates that the political framing of language—through securitization or de-securitization—plays a decisive role in shaping minority language preservation in conflict-affected contexts. While community agency remains crucial, particularly in survivalist settings such as Patani, the findings show that the state's orientation toward linguistic diversity ultimately defines the scope of revitalization. Aceh illustrates how post-conflict de-securitization and formal recognition can create an enabling environment for institutional support, albeit one that remains fragile without sustained implementation. In contrast, Patani reveals how continued securitization constrains both policy reform and community-led initiatives by positioning language as a proxy for separatism.

From the perspective of peace and conflict studies, this research reaffirms the centrality of linguistic rights in constructing a durable peace. The securitization of language operates not merely as a cultural issue but as a mechanism of political exclusion that deepens distrust and sustains conflict. In contrast, de-securitization can serve as a vehicle for reconciliation by symbolically and materially affirming the legitimacy of minority identities. Thus, language policy must be repositioned at the core of peacebuilding agendas, especially in regions with deep-rooted ethno-linguistic tensions.

Practically, the study highlights that symbolic legislation must be matched by operational investment. Without systemic reforms in education, curriculum, teacher training, and public communication strategies, the promise of language revitalization remains aspirational. Effective policies must embed local voices within the governance process, ensuring that revitalization efforts reflect community priorities rather than top-down prescriptions. Furthermore, international actors seeking to support peacebuilding must recognize the strategic value of linguistic inclusion and support localized language-planning frameworks.

Building on the acknowledged limitations, subsequent studies could expand inquiry by using large-scale ethnographic surveys to capture the everyday linguistic choices of the rural grassroots, or by adopting longitudinal designs to track how "bureaucratic inertia" in Aceh and "soft-power" surveillance in Patani evolve over the coming decade. Furthermore, this research provides a comparative model that can be tested in other multicultural contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa, which share similar histories of colonialism, ethno-political conflict, and centralized language policies.

Ultimately, this study underscores that language is not merely a communicative medium but a core axis of identity and political negotiation. For post-conflict societies, recognizing and protecting linguistic rights is not ancillary to peace but constitutive of it. Sustainable peace requires an inclusive framework that embraces, rather than suppresses, the linguistic plurality of its citizenry. The challenge for states is to move beyond control-based approaches toward policies that nurture trust, respect, and shared belonging.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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