



Social and Linguistic Adaptation among Aceh Singkil Students in Banda Aceh: Negotiating Kalak Kampong Identity

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Abstract

Background: Aceh Singkil students migrating to Banda Aceh for higher education enter a highly diverse, multi-ethnic urban campus environment. As an ethnic minority, these students face significant social and linguistic pressures to adapt to the dominant cultural norms, risking the loss of their distinct “Kalak Kampong” (village resident) identity and native language. **Objective:** This study investigates how Aceh Singkil diaspora students negotiate and maintain their Kalak Kampong cultural identity while dealing with these adaptation pressures in Banda Aceh. **Methodology:** Using a qualitative descriptive approach, primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 Aceh Singkil students enrolled in various universities. The transcripts were analyzed utilizing the Miles and Huberman interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification. **Key Findings:** The findings reveal that students actively employ strategic code-switching and bicultural integration. They utilize the Indonesian language and modify their social behavior for interethnic communication to ensure academic and social integration. Simultaneously, they strictly preserve the Singkil language and core communal values during intra-group interactions to maintain hometown solidarity. Furthermore, students maintained strong cultural pride and benefited from a welcoming campus environment that fostered curiosity rather than prejudice. **Implications:** The study demonstrates that internal provincial student mobility does not inherently erase minority identities. The practical implications highlight the need for university administrators to design inclusive campus policies and revitalize formal regional student organizations to actively support cultural diversity and bicultural resilience in modern educational hubs.

Keywords: Kalak Kampong, Cultural Identity, Student Mobility, Linguistic Adaptation, Aceh Singkil

Introduction

Identity constitutes a specific character held by individuals or groups who share a common territory and history (Santoso, 2006). Understanding identity requires analyzing geography and social interaction (Azarian, 2023). Aceh Singkil is an administrative district in Aceh Province that displays high ethnic and cultural diversity. The geographic location of this region sits exactly on the border between southern Aceh and northern North Sumatra. This border position directly forms a layered cultural identity. Meetings of various cultures creates complex social orientations. The Singkil tribe is an indigenous ethnic group living in this area. These people occupy riverbanks,



steep hills, and inland areas far from the district capital. This geographic isolation historically limited their contact with coastal groups and strengthened their internal communal bonds.

The Singkil people use the term Kalak Kampong to refer to themselves in public. The term literally means village residents. This label functions as a social boundary that differentiates their identity from various migrant ethnic groups who inhabit the economic centers. The Kalak Kampong identity carries collective memories about ancestral origins, simple living values, and strong kinship ties (Pohan, 2025). Collective memory in the Acehnese context serves as a vital mechanism for communities to maintain historical narratives, assert cultural resilience, and resist external marginalization (Thalal et al., 2026). The Singkil people assert their unique identity through active social movements. Recent research shows that the ethnic identity in Singkil is currently defined through the Enda Kalak Singkel movement. This local movement actively rejects external labeling as Pakpak and asserts the uniqueness of the inland Singkil community (Al-Fairusy & Abdullah, 2020). The border identity also connects closely to survival strategies and religious negotiations. Some individuals adopt specific religious practices as a social strategy to navigate a region dominated by strict Islamic law (Al-Fairusy et al., 2024). In matters of family law, the Aceh Singkil community negotiates between local customs and formal Islamic jurisprudence. They determine marriage compatibility criteria by blending these two systems, which reinforces their collective ethnic consciousness and social solidarity (Zuhrah et al., 2025).

Linguistic diversity further defines the complex identity in Aceh Singkil. Coastal communities generally speak Nias and Aneuk Jamee languages. People living near the provincial border speak Pakpak. However, the community agrees that Basa Kampong is the native language of the Singkil tribe. Inland residents use this language as their primary communication tool (Kamaruddin et al., 2021). Ethnic language serves a dual role. It functions as a daily communication tool and a marker of ancestral heritage. Speaking the ethnic language identifies a person as an insider and a true Kalak Kampong. Research on language attitudes indicates that Singkil youth hold positive views toward both the Singkil language and the Indonesian language (Suhery et al., 2022). They view both languages as equally important for different domains of life. The Singkil language provides proximity and ethnic solidarity, while the Indonesian language provides mobility and national integration.

Modern social mobility presents a major challenge to the preservation of this cultural identity. Many young Singkil residents leave their hometowns to migrate to urban centers. They seek better economic opportunities and higher education. This internal migration creates a network of Singkil students moving within the province. We use the term student mobility to describe this specific provincial movement rather than international diaspora. Banda Aceh is the primary destination for students moving from Aceh Singkil. The city serves as the educational center of the province and gathers people from various ethnic backgrounds (Nabila, 2020). Singkil students enter this diverse academic ecosystem as an ethnic minority. They bring their Kalak Kampong identity into a campus arena dominated by the coastal Acehnese culture.

In this multi-ethnic campus environment, students face strict demands to adapt. Social adaptation requires individuals to adjust their behavior to the norms of the majority group. Students must adapt quickly to gain acceptance into academic and social networks. This pressure forces students to balance preserving their ancestral traditions with building relationships in a modern campus. A rapid shift from local languages to the Indonesian language has occurred across Aceh since the 1970s. Factors such as prestige, modernity, and formal education drive this linguistic shift. People link the Indonesian language to national identity and campus adaptation, while they continue to view ethnic languages with strong ideological pride (Al-Auwal et al., 2024). The dual role of language becomes visible in the daily lives of these students.

Singkil students use bilingualism and code switching as their primary adaptation strategies. Language choice allows bilingual individuals to construct different identities based on their immediate social context (Nyamekye et al., 2023). Students use the Indonesian language to communicate with other ethnic groups and build academic networks. At the same time, they use the Singkil language to maintain solidarity with their hometown peers. Studies of Acehnese students in different regions show similar patterns of adaptation. Acehnese students in Bandung pass through distinct phases of social integration. They experience initial excitement, face a crisis

of cultural differences, and finally reach an adjustment phase. They ultimately become bicultural individuals who use specific communication strategies to adapt while maintaining their original identity (Muhammad Naufal & Rini Rinawati, 2025). Similarly, Acehese students in Yogyakarta dormitories show strong ethnic pride and actively display their local culture. However, they intentionally use the Indonesian language as an inclusive tool to promote tolerance among different ethnic groups (Hikmah & Suharno, 2022).

Other studies on multi-ethnic campuses confirm these behavioral adjustments. Research in Madura shows that non-local students adjust their communication styles, religious symbols, and humor to gain social acceptance without losing their original identity (Suryandari et al., 2025). These findings indicate that border groups like the Kalak Kampong negotiate their identity through a complex combination of language, religion, and custom. The ethnic label and the Singkil language connect them to their origins and solidarity. Meanwhile, the Indonesian language provides access to urban integration and formal education. Students from Singkil become bicultural and bilingual. They adjust socially in new environments but simultaneously strengthen their village identity as a primary source of pride and psychological resilience.

Previous studies focus heavily on the general language shift in the province or the adaptation of Acehese students studying outside the region. Researchers rarely examine the intra-provincial migration of minority groups like the Singkil youth to Banda Aceh. This omission creates a significant research gap regarding how internal border identities survive in dominant regional centers. We designed this qualitative study to analyze the existence and dynamics of the Kalak Kampong identity among Aceh Singkil students living in Banda Aceh. We formulate two main questions to guide our data collection. First, how do Aceh Singkil students change or maintain their Kalak Kampong identity while pursuing higher education in Banda Aceh? Second, what internal and external factors influence their decisions to preserve their mother tongue or alter their cultural practices? The answers to these questions provide direct empirical data about cultural resilience among minority student populations. University administrators can use this actionable data to design inclusive campus policies that support student diversity and foster a welcoming academic environment.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a descriptive method. The objective was to deeply explore and understand the meanings, experiences, and personal views regarding the Kalak Kampong cultural identity in specific social situations (Lubis & Murhayati, 2025). A qualitative methodology was selected because it investigates phenomena in their natural settings, allowing for an inductive approach where the results emphasize contextual meaning rather than statistical generalization (Nurrisa et al., 2025).

Data Sources

The research utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was obtained directly from the participants to ensure clear, accurate, and first-hand information regarding their lived experiences (Prasanti, 2018). The sample consisted of 10 university students originating from Aceh Singkil and currently residing in Banda Aceh, comprising one male and nine females. Secondary data was sourced from relevant academic literature, including books and peer-reviewed scientific journals related to cultural identity, diaspora, and sociolinguistics (Rahmadi, 2011).

Instruments

In accordance with qualitative research traditions, the researchers acted as the primary instrument for data gathering. A semi-structured interview guide served as the secondary instrument. This protocol contained open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the meaning of the Kalak Kampong identity, situational language use, urban adaptation, and peer responses. Digital audio recorders and field notes were also utilized as supporting instruments to accurately capture verbal responses and contextual nuances during the sessions.

Data Collecting and Procedures

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, specifically targeting active university students from Aceh Singkil who had migrated to Banda Aceh for higher education. The data collection phase occurred between February and April 2026. Face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted in natural settings, such as campus environments and student dormitories, to ensure participant comfort. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent from the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Measurement and Trustworthiness

In the context of qualitative methodology, measurement refers to the trustworthiness and credibility of the data. To ensure validity, this study employed a rigorous transcript review process. Following the verbatim transcription of the interviews, the data was carefully reviewed to verify its accuracy against the audio recordings. The most relevant and representative responses were selected to feature in the analysis. Furthermore, the primary data was continuously cross-referenced with secondary literature and established theoretical frameworks to ensure contextual validity and reliable interpretation.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data was analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman. This continuous, iterative process included three main stages (Ash-Shiddiqi et al., 2025):

1. **Data Reduction:** The raw field data from the transcripts was filtered, coded, and focused strictly on the core issues surrounding the Kalak Kampong identity, discarding information irrelevant to the research questions.
2. **Data Display:** The coded information was organized and categorized into a systematic narrative, allowing for the clear identification of recurring thematic patterns (e.g., linguistic adaptation, cultural pride).
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** The synthesized themes were interpreted to formulate answers to the research questions. These initial conclusions were then verified by re-examining the original transcripts to confirm the absolute validity of the research findings.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded rich insights into how students from Aceh Singkil manage their cultural identity in a diverse urban campus. The data reveals a complex, highly active process of identity negotiation. Rather than passively absorbing the dominant culture of Banda Aceh, these students make conscious, strategic choices about when, where, and how to express their Kalak Kampong heritage. The findings are categorized into five major themes: situational linguistic adaptation, enduring regional pride, the impact of positive peer reception, shifts in traditional social habits, and the ambiguous role of formal student organizations.

Situational Linguistic Adaptation and Code-Switching

The most prominent finding in the data is the strategic use of language. Language serves as the primary battleground for cultural preservation and the primary tool for social integration. The students universally identified Basa Kampong (the Singkil language) as the core marker of their identity. In their hometowns, this language permeates every aspect of daily life, from family interactions to public commerce. However, upon arriving in Banda Aceh, the students face a linguistic environment dominated by the Indonesian language and the coastal Acehese language.

To adapt with this unfamiliar environment, the Singkil students engage in continuous, daily code-switching. They do not abandon their mother tongue; rather, they compartmentalize its use based on their immediate social context. When interacting in classrooms, university public spaces, or diverse friendship groups, the students deliberately switch to the Indonesian language. Furthermore, they actively neutralize their native accents. The Singkil accent is often described by participants as sounding similar to the Batak accent which is harsher and more direct than the

melodic coastal Acehnese intonation. To avoid misunderstandings or standing out unnecessarily, students smooth out their intonation.

Eka Salsabila detailed this process of linguistic adjustment: “Adapun kebiasaan yang saya tinggal kan semenjak di Banda Aceh yaitu, logat saat berbicara. sebenarnya bukan meninggalkan akan tetapi menyesuaikan dengan teman-teman dari daerah lain, misalnya saya berinteraksi dengan teman-teman dari Banda Aceh menggunakan Bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan gaya bahasa atau logat bahasa mengikuti logat teman-teman dari Banda Aceh... agar terlihat lebih nyaman dan nyambung untuk berbicara.” [The habit I have left behind since being in Banda Aceh is my speaking accent. Actually, it is not leaving it behind, but adjusting to friends from other regions. For example, I interact with friends from Banda Aceh using good Indonesian and a language style or accent that follows theirs... so that it feels more comfortable and connected to speak.]

This behavior aligns perfectly with the concept of communication convergence. The students modify their speech to seek approval and facilitate smooth interactions. However, this convergence is strictly temporary. The moment a Singkil student encounters a peer from their hometown, they immediately revert to Basa Kampong. This switch is not just a matter of comfort; it is a vital social ritual that confirms their shared Kalak Kampong identity.

Intan Surur confirmed this dual linguistic life: “Saya menyesuaikan gaya bahasa dengan menggunakan bahasa Indo yang lebih umum dan netral agar mudah dipahami oleh teman-teman mahasiswa dari berbagai daerah... [tetapi] saya tetap mempertahankan kebiasaan saya bersifat nilai dan etika karena itu merupakan bagian dari jati diri saya.” [I adjust my language style by using a more general and neutral Indonesian so that it is easily understood by fellow students from various regions... [but] I maintain my habits related to values and ethics because that is part of my identity.]

The students view the Singkil language as a sacred bond. Refusing to speak it with a fellow Singkil student is considered a severe social offense. Rahman expressed strong frustration toward peers who pretend to forget their native tongue: “Mela ia berbahasa singkil, i gelakhna oda ia mensyukuri nikmat tading di singkil atau beridentitas kalak kampong.” [If someone is ashamed to speak Singkil, it means they are not grateful for the blessing of living in Singkil or having the Kalak Kampong identity.]

Enduring Regional Pride and Cultural Resilience

Despite the immense pressure to conform to the dominant urban culture, the participants exhibited an extraordinary level of regional pride. The term “Kalak Kampong” literally translates to “village people,” a phrase that could easily be internalized as an insult or a marker of inferiority in a modern, metropolitan university setting. However, the students have entirely reclaimed this term. They wear it as a badge of honor that signifies resilience, authenticity, and strong moral character.

The data shows that this pride acts as a psychological shield. By valuing their rural origins, the students protect their self-esteem against potential marginalization. They view their heritage not as an obstacle to academic success, but as a unique advantage that broadens their perspective. They feel a deep, personal responsibility to act as cultural ambassadors.

Halimatussakdiah articulated this existential duty to preserve the culture: “Menurut saya, identitas itu memang harus dipertahankan karena itu adalah jati diri kita dan kita berasal dari sana, apabila kita tidak mempertahankan maka generasi selanjutnya pasti akan mudah punah.” [In my opinion, identity must indeed be maintained because it is our true self and we come from there. If we do not maintain it, the next generation will certainly easily fade away.]

This pride prevents the students from adopting an assimilation strategy. They refuse to erase their background to fit in. Rahman passionately defended the visibility of his identity: “Menurut saya tidak perlu kita sembunyikan kita sebagai identitas kalak kampong karena itu adalah anugrah, untuk apa kita sembunyikka, untuk apa kita malu, untuk apa kita bohong, karena di sana tempat kita lahir.” [In my opinion, we don't need to hide our Kalak Kampong identity because it is a blessing. Why should we hide it, why should we be ashamed, why should we lie, because that is where we were born.]

The Impact of Positive Peer Reception and Cultural Curiosity

The successful maintenance of the Kalak Kampong identity is not solely due to the internal resilience of the Singkil students. It is heavily facilitated by the external environment. The qualitative data reveals that the general student body at universities in Banda Aceh is highly receptive to cultural diversity. When Singkil students display their unique traits, they rarely encounter hostility, mockery, or overt discrimination.

Instead, the dominant response from non-Singkil peers is genuine curiosity. Because Aceh Singkil is located on the far border of the province, its culture and language are virtually unknown to students from the northern and eastern coasts. When Singkil students speak their native language or discuss their local traditions, it sparks educational conversations.

Silvi Ratusiska shared an illuminating experience regarding this dynamic: “Teman-teman kampus saya umumnya merespon dengan rasa penasaran dan ketertarikan ketika saya memperkenalkan budaya Singkil. Misalnya dari segi bahasa yang sangat asing di dengar oleh mereka... namun mereka biasanya meminta saya mengulang dan menjelaskan bahasa dan artinya, namun mereka senang karena bisa belajar kosa kata baru dari daerah lain.” [My campus friends generally respond with curiosity and interest when I introduce Singkil culture. For example, regarding the language, which sounds very foreign to them... but they usually ask me to repeat and explain the language and its meaning, and they are happy because they can learn new vocabulary from another region.]

Eva Mardiana Manik recounted how her peers reacted when she answered a phone call from her parents in the Singkil language: “Mereka asing dengan bahasa itu maka mereka menganggapnya lucu dengan logat saya yang keluar. Lalu mereka menanyakan artinya, dan mencoba mempraktikkannya tipis tipis.” [They were unfamiliar with the language so they found it amusing with the accent that came out. Then they asked for the meaning, and tried to practice it slightly.]

This positive reception is crucial. It validates the Singkil students' cultural pride and lowers their social anxiety. When the host environment treats a minority culture as a fascinating learning opportunity rather than a deviation from the norm, the minority group is much more likely to pursue an integration strategy rather than retreating into cultural separation.

Shifts in Traditional Social Habits and Urban Adaptation

While language can be preserved through private conversations, traditional social habits face much harsher constraints in an urban academic setting. The Kalak Kampong identity is deeply rooted in physical communal activities. In their hometowns, these students participated in frequent gotong royong (communal work), large kenduri (feasts), and routine neighborhood gatherings. These activities build the intense kinship network that defines the Singkil community.

Upon moving to Banda Aceh, the geographic dispersion of students and the heavy demands of university schedules make it impossible to maintain these practices at the same scale. The students mourn the loss of these deep communal ties, recognizing that their urban lifestyle is fundamentally more individualistic.

Eva Mardiana Manik noted the specific traditions she had to leave behind: “Kebiasaan yang saya tinggal kan: Ziarah Kuburan [dan] Membantu ketika pesta... Selama di Banda Aceh belum pernah berziarah mungkin karena anak kos an dan tidak bersama keluarga.” [Habits I left behind: Grave visitation [and] helping during feasts... While in Banda Aceh I have never gone on a visitation, perhaps because I am a boarding house student and not with my family.]

Silvi Ratusiska highlighted the difference in the pace of life: “Di kampung suasana seperti itu sangat mudah di lakukan karena jarak rumah yang berdekatan serta hubungan kekeluargaan yang akrab. Namun, ketika di banda aceh kehidupan terasa lebih cepat dan kesibukan kuliah membuat tidak sempat untuk berkumpul seperti di kampung.” (In the village, such an atmosphere is very easy to achieve because the houses are close together and family relations are intimate. However, in Banda Aceh, life feels faster and the busyness of college makes there no time to gather like in the village.)

Despite these structural barriers, the students attempt to replicate micro-versions of their village traditions. They cannot host massive feasts, but they make a concerted effort to visit sick friends, share meals in dormitories, and maintain a high standard of interpersonal politeness. They adapt the spirit of their village traditions to fit the physical constraints of the city.

The Ambiguous Role of Formal Regional Organizations

Universities in Indonesia frequently host “Paguyuban Mahasiswa Daerah” (Regional Student Associations). These formal organizations are designed to help diaspora students’ network, preserve their culture, and support one another. However, the data reveals a sharp divide regarding the effectiveness of the Aceh Singkil student organizations in Banda Aceh.

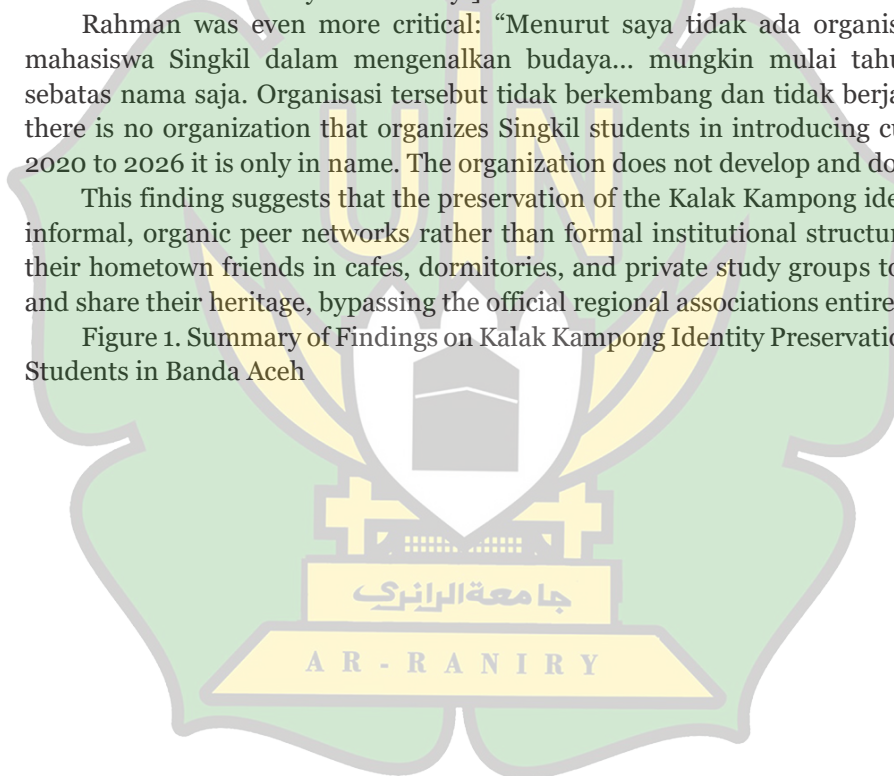
Some students view these organizations as vital cultural sanctuaries. Leni Br. Berutu argued for their importance: “Organisasi Aceh Singkil yang ada di Banda Aceh memang penting karena apabila ada kabar atau informasi pasti pertama yang memberitahu adalah organisasi... menurut saya dari segi budaya, mereka mempertahankan bahasa itu dan tetap menggunakan gaya bahasa sendiri.” [The Aceh Singkil organization in Banda Aceh is indeed important because if there is news or information, the organization is the first to inform... in my opinion, in terms of culture, they maintain the language and continue to use their own language style.]

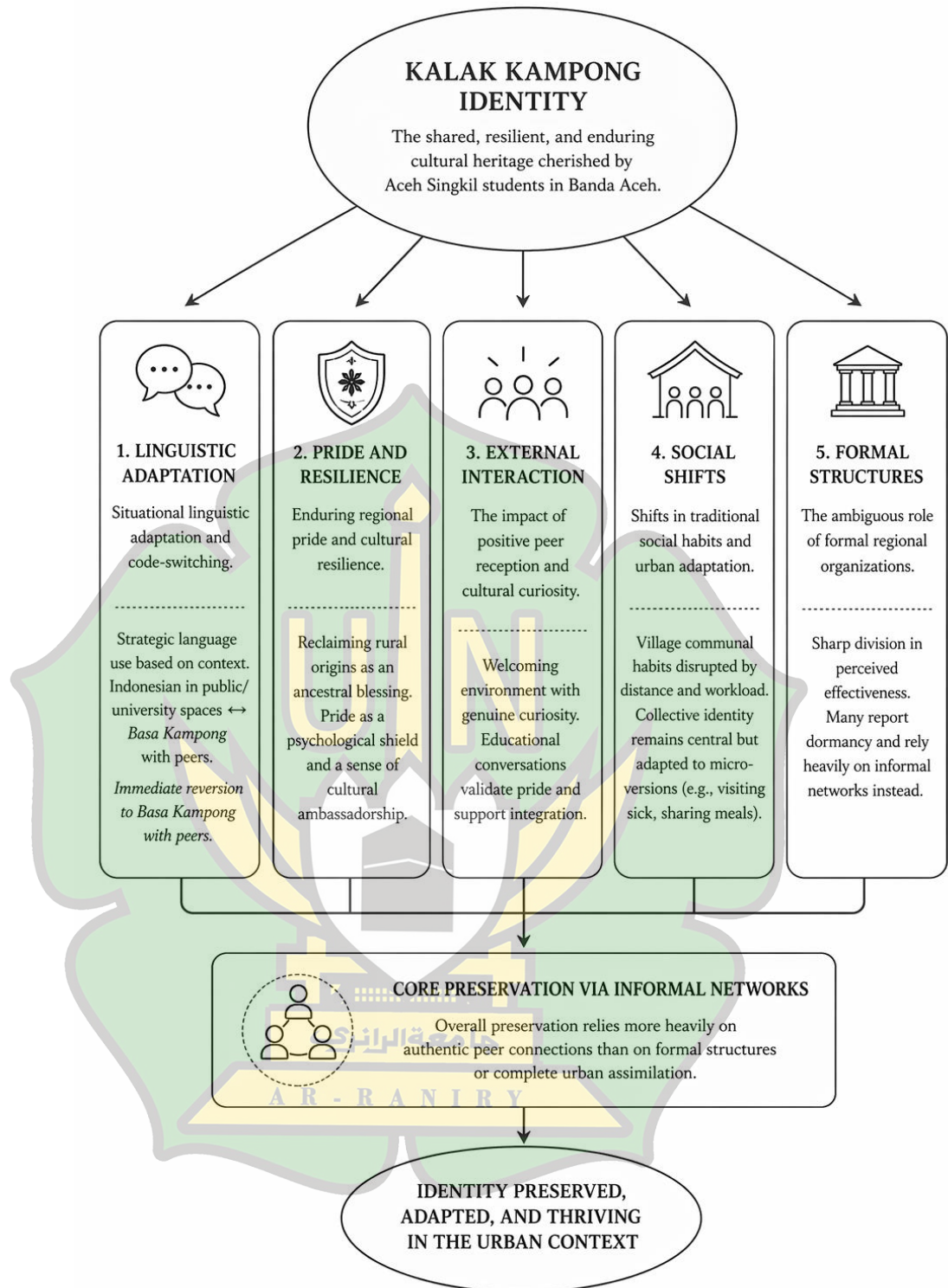
Conversely, a significant portion of the participants reported that these organizations are essentially dormant. They exist on paper but fail to execute meaningful programs. Eka Salsabila noted: “Menurut saya di dalam berorganisasi budaya singkil masih tetap digunakan, akan tetapi saya tidak tertarik untuk mengikuti organisasi tersebut karena tidak begitu berjalan.” [In my opinion, Singkil culture is still used within the organization, but I am not interested in joining it because it does not really run actively.]

Rahman was even more critical: “Menurut saya tidak ada organisasi yang membenahi mahasiswa Singkil dalam mengenalkan budaya... mungkin mulai tahun 2020-2026 hanya sebatas nama saja. Organisasi tersebut tidak berkembang dan tidak berjalan.” [In my opinion, there is no organization that organizes Singkil students in introducing culture... perhaps from 2020 to 2026 it is only in name. The organization does not develop and does not run.]

This finding suggests that the preservation of the Kalak Kampong identity relies heavily on informal, organic peer networks rather than formal institutional structures. Students seek out their hometown friends in cafes, dormitories, and private study groups to speak their language and share their heritage, bypassing the official regional associations entirely.

Figure 1. Summary of Findings on Kalak Kampong Identity Preservation among Aceh Singkil Students in Banda Aceh





Discussion

Social identity encompasses religion, ethnicity, and social class. Cultural identity refers to the unique characteristics that distinguish a group, including language, customs, traditions, values, and beliefs passed down through generations (Anisa Andiana W.S et al., 2025). Identity within a society does not function as a static, equal entity. It consists of ongoing social interactions and shifts according to daily life developments. Cultural identity frequently faces challenges from modern information flows, changing values, and urban lifestyles that threaten the survival of local traditions (Suryandari et al., 2025). Therefore, communities must actively maintain and preserve their cultural identity to prevent external influences from erasing it.

Identity serves as more than a simple marker of origin. It forms the foundation of how individuals think, behave, and interact socially. Hall argues that identity is not a fixed entity but a continuous production that remains in progress (Melia & Mesra, 2025). Identity adapts dynamically to the environmental conditions' individuals face. Social interactions trigger these constant adjustments. University students experience high cultural identity dynamics because they navigate two distinct worlds. They balance the original world that shaped their identity from birth and the new environment that influences their personal development. Singkil students bring their Kalak Kampong identity into a new, highly diverse campus environment. They do not always display this identity entirely. They adjust their cultural expression according to their immediate social situations while retaining core values like simplicity, kinship, and distinctive interaction styles.

This phenomenon of student mobility can be understood through the lens of provincial diaspora. The concept of diaspora traditionally describes the dispersion of a nation across the globe (Grossman, 2019). Safran (1991) defines a diaspora as a minority ethnic group residing in a host location while maintaining strong sentimental and material ties to their homeland. He describes it as a segment of a nation living outside its native territory. While diaspora usually implies international movement driven by force or voluntary economic goals, this study applies the concept to internal provincial migration. Migration involves the relative movement of people from one place to another to settle. The Aceh Singkil diaspora refers to students who migrate to Banda Aceh to pursue higher education and broaden their perspectives. This movement forces them to adapt to a new dominant culture while attempting to maintain their original heritage. These students do not erase their cultural footprint. They modify their speech and habits to interact smoothly with peers from other regions, adjusting their traditionally distinct accents to blend into the city.

At the core of this diaspora experience is the meaning of their specific social identity. The Singkil people use the term Kalak Kampong to identify themselves as a community with specific cultural values originating from the inland riverbanks (Kamaruddin et al., 2021). Cultural identity possesses a distinct origin and history that unites a community through shared cultural codes. The interview data shows that Singkil students in Banda Aceh view this identity as an ancestral blessing. They consider it a source of immense pride. The students understand that this identity distinguishes them from others and prevents their heritage from fading. The Kalak Kampong identity represents a social construction built from origins, language, and early life values. It functions not just as a geographic label, but as a practical guide for daily community living and a marker for the younger generation.

Social identity theory explains how individuals define themselves based on group memberships. Tajfel (2004) developed this theory to explain intergroup behavior. Individuals categorize themselves and others into distinct social groups to navigate social environments. For students from Aceh Singkil, the Kalak Kampong label serves as their primary ingroup category. They use this label to differentiate themselves from the outgroup, which consists of students from other regions in Banda Aceh. The theory emphasizes that individuals seek to achieve a positive social identity. Singkil students achieve this positive distinction by valuing their unique language and kinship networks.

Among this valued trait, language functions as a communication tool and a dominant factor of culture (Devianty, 2017). Language and culture influence each other deeply. Regional languages represent valuable national assets that carry traditional heritage (Santoso, 2006). In Aceh Singkil, the community calls their native tongue Basa Kampong. Inland residents use this language for all daily communication across all age groups. However, the diverse diaspora environment in Banda Aceh alters how students use this language. Students switch to the Indonesian language when speaking with peers from other regions to ensure clarity and comfort. They also modify their intonation and accent to match the local Banda Aceh style. Despite this shift in public spaces, students strictly preserve Basa Kampong for private interactions with fellow Singkil students in dormitories or campus gatherings. Language remains a powerful identity marker through this situational application.

Communication accommodation theory explores the cognitive reasons behind language shifts during human interaction. Giles developed this theory to explain how individuals modify

their speech patterns to manage social distance. Convergence involves adapting communication behavior to become more similar to the conversation partner (Gallois & Giles, 2015). Singkil students use convergence when interacting with the general student population in Banda Aceh. They switch to the Indonesian language and adopt a neutral accent to reduce social friction and build rapport. Divergence involves emphasizing communication differences to separate oneself from the conversation partner. Singkil students use divergence when interacting within their own community. They use the Singkil language among themselves to assert their distinct group identity and maintain cultural pride.

Beyond language, customs and social habits strongly shape the Kalak Kampong identity. Village life features strong mutual cooperation, communal feasts, grave visitations during religious holidays, and casual neighborhood gatherings. These activities demonstrate deep kinship within the Singkil community. Urban university life disrupts these routines. The fast pace and heavy academic workload in Banda Aceh prevent students from holding regular gatherings or participating in traditional communal events. Cultural adaptation involves a chronological process. Individuals begin with initial ease, experience a crisis of incompatibility, and eventually achieve functional adjustment (Enti Agestia et al., 2024). Singkil students adapt primarily by modifying their interaction patterns. They use the Indonesian language to establish comfortable and effective communication with a diverse peer group.

Acculturation theory explains the cultural changes that occur when different cultural groups come into continuous contact. Berry (2005) proposed a model of acculturation strategies based on the desire to maintain heritage culture and the desire to interact with the dominant society. Integration occurs when individuals maintain their original cultural identity while actively participating in the dominant society. Singkil students primarily adopt the integration strategy. They engage in the academic and social life of Banda Aceh universities and form friendships with students from various backgrounds. They also dedicate specific effort to preserve their Kalak Kampong customs.

The integration strategy is further supported by the fact that the broader campus environment reacts positively to the Kalak Kampong identity. Students from other regions show genuine curiosity about Singkil traditions and language. They frequently ask for vocabulary translations and express interest in local customs. This positive reception encourages Singkil students and validates their cultural pride. Organizations also provide a mechanism for individuals to achieve collective goals (Demak et al., 2025). Formal student organizations present a mixed impact on identity preservation. Some students rely on the Aceh Singkil student organization to meet peers, strengthen kinship, and practice their native language. Conversely, other students report that these organizations remain inactive and fail to run effective cultural programs. The effectiveness of these organizations depends entirely on individual student involvement.

Ultimately, the survival of these cultural elements relies on continuous negotiation. Existence refers to a dynamic process of becoming and surviving within a social environment (Tanjung & Pardede, 2019). The Kalak Kampong identity continues to exist in Banda Aceh through active negotiation. Students do not lose their identity. They place it flexibly according to context (Melia & Mesra, 2025). They use the Indonesian language to navigate academic requirements without abandoning their cultural roots. This adjustment represents a balanced strategy between maintaining origins and meeting social demands. This research shows that cultural identity operates situationally. Internal factors, such as personal awareness and ethnic pride, drive students to protect their heritage. External factors, such as the diverse social network, force practical linguistic adaptations. These combined factors shape how minority students successfully express and defend their identity in modern educational centers.

Conclusion

This qualitative study investigated how diaspora students from Aceh Singkil negotiate their Kalak Kampong identity while pursuing higher education in the diverse, urban campus environment of Banda Aceh. The research aimed to determine how this minority identity is maintained, altered, or preserved in the face of dominant cultural pressures.

The findings conclusively demonstrate that the Kalak Kampong identity does not succumb to assimilation. Instead, it undergoes a sophisticated process of situational negotiation. The students exhibit remarkable resilience by employing a bicultural integration strategy. They utilize the Indonesian language and adapt their social behavior to build broad, interethnic networks and achieve academic success. Simultaneously, they fiercely protect their native Singkil language and core communal values, using them as exclusive tools to maintain intra-group solidarity and psychological grounding.

This successful navigation is fueled by two distinct forces: an intense, internalized pride in their rural, border origins, and a generally welcoming, curious reception from the dominant student body in Banda Aceh. Furthermore, the study revealed that while traditional, large-scale village habits must be modified for urban life, the spirit of kinship survives through informal peer networks, often bypassing formal, yet inactive, regional student organizations.

In conclusion, internal provincial student mobility does not necessitate the erasure of minority identities. The students from Aceh Singkil prove that it is entirely possible to master the rules of a new, dominant society while keeping the fire of one's ancestral heritage burning brightly. They stand as a testament to the dynamic, enduring nature of cultural identity in the modern educational landscape.

While this study provides a deep understanding of the Singkil student experience, it opens several avenues for future academic inquiry. First, future research should adopt a longitudinal approach. Tracking a cohort of Singkil students from their freshman year through graduation and into their professional careers would reveal whether their bicultural integration strategy persists in the workforce, or if long-term urban residency eventually leads to cultural assimilation.

Second, comparative studies are highly recommended. Researchers should apply this methodology to other minority ethnic groups studying in Banda Aceh, such as students from the Gayo highlands, the Alas valley, or the islands of Simeulue. Comparing the adaptation strategies of these different groups would highlight whether the Singkil experience is unique or indicative of a broader pattern of provincial diaspora behavior.

Third, quantitative research could build upon these qualitative findings. Developing a survey instrument to measure the exact frequency of native language use, the degree of cultural pride, and the levels of acculturative stress among a larger sample size of minority students would provide statistically generalizable data that could directly inform university policy-making across Indonesia.

Ethics approval

The study was conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided explicit informed consent prior to their participation in the interviews.

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Competing interests

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Underlying data

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

Declaration of artificial intelligence use

This study used artificial intelligence (AI) tools and methodologies in the following capacities: Manuscript writing support: AI-based language models (Gemini and Quillbot) were employed to assist with:

- Language refinement (improving grammar, sentence structure, and readability of the manuscript).
- Content summarization (assisting in summarizing findings and conclusions in a concise manner).
- Technical writing assistance (providing suggestions for structuring complex descriptions more effectively).

We confirm that all AI-assisted processes were critically reviewed by the authors to ensure the integrity and reliability of the results. The final decisions and interpretations presented in this article were solely made by the authors.

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