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Transforming Caste Traditions: Intracultural Communication and Structural Changes Among the Kei People in Southeast Maluku

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Abstract

This study investigated the persistence and transformation of caste-based social stratification in Kei society, Southeast Maluku, amid processes of modernization and local democratization. While everyday social interactions increasingly reflected more fluid relations, traditional caste distinctions between Mel-mel, Ren-ren, and Iri-ri remained embedded in customary institutions, religious practices, and local political structures. This research aimed to examine how caste relationships were reproduced, negotiated, and contested through intracultural communication. Adopting a qualitative ethnographic design, data were collected through prolonged field observation, in-depth interviews with community members in caste groups, and analysis of customary practices, ritual roles, and local political participation. The findings showed that caste domination persisted through the sacralization of tradition, symbolic hierarchies, and patterns of economic dependence that normalized unequal social positions. At the same time, expanded access to education and participation in postreform local democratic processes enabled members of the Iri-ri group to renegotiate social identities and challenged inherited stigmas, particularly in political and bureaucratic arenas. This study demonstrated that caste in Kei society operated as a dynamic communicative process that simultaneously sustained social order and opened spaces for gradual transformation. The findings contribute to broader discussions on power, culture, and social inequality in post-traditional and indigenous societies.

Keywords: *Caste; Social Stratification; Intracultural Communication; Cultural Hegemony; Ethnographic Study.*

A. Introduction

Amidst the accelerating pace of social change, traditional communities across the world are increasingly required to negotiate continuity and transformation in order to remain socially relevant without losing their cultural identity. This negotiation often involves critical reflection on inherited values that are perceived as incompatible with democratic principles, social equality, and the demands of modern governance (Gary Feinberg, 2023; Inglehart, 1997; Amnesti et al., 2023). Rather than disappearing, many traditional social structures persist by adapting to new political, educational, and institutional contexts, producing complex patterns of continuity and change. These dynamics are particularly visible in societies where long-standing cultural hierarchies continue to shape everyday social relations.

Such a condition is evident in the Kei community of Southeast Maluku, Eastern Indonesia, where a caste-based social stratification system remains an integral part of social organization. Historically and culturally, Kei society has been structured into three main strata—Mel-mel, Ren-ren, and Iri-ri—regulated through customary law known as Larvul Ngabal (Sedubun, 2012). The Mel-mel group occupies the highest position, inheriting exclusive rights across generations, including leadership roles in customary governance, religious authority, and strict endogamous marriage practices. The Ren-ren group occupies an intermediate position, commonly described as free or common people, but with limited opportunities for upward social mobility, particularly in marital relations. At the lowest level, the Iri-ri group has historically been associated with service roles and burdened by persistent social stigmas that mark them as inferior (Thapa et al., 2021; Sihombing et al., 2024). This stratification has not merely functioned as a cultural classification, but has deeply structured access to power, resources, and social recognition.

For centuries, caste-based stratification in Kei society was largely accepted as a natural and unquestioned social order rooted in tradition. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept, this system can be understood as a hegemonic structure in which domination operates not primarily through coercion, but through the internalization of norms and values that legitimize inequality (Tabrani ZA et al., 2024; Iswantoro et al., 2024; Baharudin et al., 2023). During the Dutch colonial period and later under Indonesia's New Order regime, this hierarchical structure was further reinforced and instrumentalized as a mechanism of governance. Colonial and postcolonial authorities relied on local elites to maintain stability, granting political and administrative legitimacy

to dominant groups while marginalizing others. In this context, social stratification that was originally cultural in nature became increasingly institutionalized as a state-reinforced power structure, reproducing structural inequality and limiting the possibilities for egalitarian social transformation (Baranyanan et al., 2024; Jannah et al., 2023; Taufik & Taufik, 2023). This pattern reflects Joel S. Migdal's (2001) argument that states often form strategic alliances with local elites to govern effectively, even at the cost of perpetuating deep-seated social inequalities.

Comparable patterns of caste-based or hereditary stratification can be observed in other developing societies, including the Dalit community in India (Natrajan, 2022; Thapa et al., 2021; Munirah et al., 2025) and various traditional communities in Africa (Vitturini, 2020; Purba et al., 2024; Nasrudin et al., 2025). In these contexts, caste systems endure not simply because of material domination, but because cultural hegemony renders inequality socially acceptable and morally justified (Gramsci, 1971). Through rituals, symbols, language, and everyday practices, social hierarchies are normalized and reproduced across generations, making inequality appear natural and inevitable (Zein, et al., 2025).

At the same time, contemporary social realities indicate that these seemingly rigid structures are increasingly being challenged. Processes of modernization, particularly through inclusive education and local democratization in Indonesia, have generated new spaces for interaction, negotiation, and social mobility. Traditional elites who once monopolized authority are now compelled to adapt to changing political and social conditions, while marginalized groups gain access to education, electoral participation, and public discourse (Shalati et al., 2023; Tabrani ZA et al., 2023; Arifin et al., 2025). These changes have initiated a gradual renegotiation of social roles and identities, suggesting a shift from rigid traditional domination toward more inclusive, though still contested, forms of social representation.

Despite the growing body of literature on caste, social stratification, and inequality, most existing studies tend to approach caste primarily as a static system of domination that must be dismantled or abolished. While such perspectives are valuable, they often overlook the communicative processes through which caste hierarchies are reproduced, contested, and transformed in everyday social life. In particular, there is limited attention to how intercultural and intracultural communication mediates the renegotiation of meanings, values, and identities within stratified societies, especially in contexts shaped simultaneously by tradition,

modernization, and globalization (Alkhuseri et al., 2025; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Nakayama & Halualani, 2011; Fahlevi & Murziqin, 2024). As a result, the mechanisms through which marginalized groups articulate resistance, negotiate recognition, and challenge symbolic domination remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by examining caste transformation in Kei society through the lens of intracultural communication (Carbaugh, 2005; Philipsen, 1992). Rather than treating caste solely as a structure of oppression to be eradicated, this approach foregrounds communication as a dynamic arena in which social meanings are produced, contested, and reconfigured. Intracultural communication allows for an analysis of how members of different strata interact within a shared cultural framework, how dominant groups maintain legitimacy, and how marginalized groups such as the *Iri-ri* articulate symbolic resistance without necessarily rejecting the entire cultural system that has historically sustained social order (Tomaselli & Shepperson, 1997; Murziqin, 2021).

This study adopts an intracultural communication perspective to examine how caste relations in Kei society are maintained, negotiated, and reworked in the context of social change. By engaging with critical approaches to hegemony alongside communication theory, the analysis moves beyond simplistic oppositions between tradition and modernity, and instead foregrounds the dynamic processes through which social hierarchies are reproduced and contested in everyday interactions. Within this framework, caste is understood not as a fixed or monolithic structure, but as a social formation that is continuously shaped through communicative practices influenced by education, local democratization, and shifting forms of social awareness.

Building on this perspective, the study seeks to analyze how processes of negotiation, adaptation, and transformation unfold within the caste structure of Kei society through intracultural communication. By examining patterns of interaction, symbolic practices, and changing social roles among the *Mel-mel*, *Ren-ren*, and *Iri-ri* groups, this research aims to illuminate how actors positioned at the margins navigate cultural constraints, reinterpret inherited social meanings, and engage in the gradual reconfiguration of power relations within a post-traditional social context.

B. Method

This study employed an ethnographic research design within a descriptive qualitative framework grounded in intercultural communication (Denzin & Lincoln,

2009). The ethnographic approach was selected to capture the lived experiences, interactional patterns, and cultural meanings embedded in everyday social relations among caste groups in Kei society. Data collection was conducted through prolonged field engagement between 2022 and 2023, allowing the researchers to develop contextual familiarity and sustained interaction with community members across different social strata.

The research subjects comprised members of the *Mel-mel*, *Ren-ren*, and *Iri-ri* groups, representing diverse social positions within the local caste structure. A total of 24 key informants were purposively selected, including traditional leaders, religious figures, village officials, and community members from both dominant and subordinate groups. The inclusion criteria focused on individuals who were actively involved in cultural, religious, political, or social activities and who were willing to participate in in-depth interviews and reflective discussions on everyday experiences, social relations, and the persistence of caste-related stereotypes.

Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and cultural documentation. Participant observation involved the systematic observation of cultural and religious rituals, community meetings, political campaigns, and routine interactions occurring both naturally and in organized settings. These observations were recorded in detailed field notes. In-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to elicit informants' narratives regarding caste relations, communication practices, and perceived social changes. Interviews were documented through audio recordings and written transcripts, complemented by visual and textual documentation of relevant cultural practices where appropriate.

The collected data—including field notes, interview transcripts, and cultural records—were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved familiarization with the data, coding of recurring patterns, and the identification of themes related to communication practices, social representation, and identity negotiation among caste groups. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied source triangulation by comparing data obtained from different informants and methods, as well as confirmation of interpretations through follow-up discussions with selected key informants (Miles, 1992).

Throughout the research process, ethical principles of social research were strictly observed. All informants provided informed consent prior to participation,

and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured in data recording and reporting. The study also respected local cultural values, norms, and sensitivities, particularly given the sensitive nature of caste relations within the Kei community.

C. Results and Discussion

This section will highlight some interesting research findings, whether obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, or literature studies of the Kei people and their cultural dynamics over several centuries. Especially about how social stratification (caste) was formed, or shaped the cultural character of the Kei people, and the various implications that have been caused to date.

1. Results

The Kei Islands are located in the southeastern part of Maluku Province, Eastern Indonesia, bordered by southern Papua to the north, the Tanimbar Islands to the south, the Aru Archipelago to the east, and the Banda Sea to the west. Historical records and local narratives indicate that the islands have been known by several names, including Kei, Quey, Muar (Moar), and Evav. According to Pattikaihatu (1998), two names are predominantly used: Kei in national and administrative contexts, and Evav (or Nuhu Evav) in local customary and vernacular usage. These terms are still used concurrently by the community.

Figure 1. The Map of Kei Island–Maluku

Geographically, Southeast Maluku consists of 112 islands grouped into two major clusters—Kei Besar (Nuhu Yuut) and Kei Kecil (Nuhu Roa)—as well as smaller island groups such as Kur, Tayando, and areas historically linked to Tanimbar. Field observations and demographic data estimate the current Kei population at approximately 100,000 people. Many residents continue to observe customary norms regulated by Larvul Ngabal, which functions as the primary customary framework governing social conduct and intergroup relations.

Historical narratives collected from informants describe periods of intergroup conflict prior to the establishment of Larvul Ngabal. Oral histories recount the role of a noble figure, Kasdew, and his son Tabtut, who is believed to have migrated from Bali and later initiated customary regulations aimed at restoring order in the Kei Islands. Larvul Ngabal is described as consisting of seven core articles that regulate obligations, prohibitions, and respect among community members (Bukido, 2025). Informants consistently stated that Larvul Ngabal remains a binding customary reference across generations.

Ethnographic data confirm that Kei society is traditionally structured into three main social strata: *Mel-mel*, *Ren-ren*, and *Iri-ri*. The *Mel-mel* group is identified as the upper stratum, comprising noble families and individuals recognized for lineage, leadership roles, personal distinction, or wealth. The *Ren-ren* group occupies an intermediate position and is described as indigenous free people who historically accepted the presence of *Mel-mel* groups. *Ren-ren* status includes several subcategories differentiated by lineage, settlement patterns, and degrees of autonomy within village structures. The *Iri-ri* group occupies the lowest stratum and consists of individuals historically associated with service roles. Field data indicate that the *Iri-ri* category is further differentiated into several subgroups based on historical circumstances, dependency relations, and social roles.

Table 1. Traditional caste structure in Kei Society

Social Group	General Position	Key Characteristics (Descriptive)
Mel-mel	Upper stratum	Customary leadership, noble lineage, access to authority
Ren-ren	Middle stratum	Indigenous free people, limited social mobility
Iri-ri	Lower stratum	Service roles, historically stigmatized

Historical agreements between *Mel-mel* and *Ren-ren* groups are described as having been formalized through solemn customary treaties involving ritualized blood oaths. These agreements established governance authority, mutual obligations, and restrictions on intermarriage. Informants stated that violations of these agreements were historically associated with severe sanctions, including punishment known as *Lud Luduk*, commonly described as drowning. Narratives of *Lud Luduk* continue to be preserved as sacred customary heritage and are widely recognized within the community.

Colonial-era data indicate that Dutch governance practices reinforced existing caste structures through indirect administrative strategies. Historical accounts and informant narratives note that individuals from *Mel-mel* communities were frequently appointed to leadership positions such as kings or *hala'ai* due to their administrative capacity. Government policies implemented from the colonial period through the New Order era strengthened *Mel-mel* access to education, bureaucracy, and economic resources, while *Ren-ren* and *Iri-ri* groups experienced structural marginalization. In Ohoiwait village, for example, informants reported that the customary role of *nuhu duan* (traditional Ren leader) declined and was eventually considered inactive following the transfer of customary authority.

Field findings document persistent caste-based stereotypes, particularly toward the *Iri-ri* group. Informants from the *Iri-ri* community consistently rejected the label of "slave," emphasizing their possession of customs and ancestral identity. One informant stated:

> *"We ask all our friends, 'We're not slaves. If we were slaves, we wouldn't have customs, but we do have customs. Furthermore, we are also descendants of the original inhabitants of Kei"*. (Interview with MGF).

Other narratives indicate that the association between the *Iri-ri* group and servitude emerged during the colonial period, when many *Iri-ri* individuals worked as laborers, domestic helpers, or plantation workers in *Mel-mel* households. These roles were typically unpaid, with subsistence needs provided according to customary obligations. Another informant expressed discomfort with the continued use of the term "slave": *"I'm sorry, it's hot for my ears if someone says we're slaves"*. (Interview with MHD).

Although explicit references to slavery are now rarely used in daily interactions, informants reported that stigma remains present in implicit forms, particularly in political competition and religious leadership. Several informants stated that

individuals from the *Iri-ri* group face difficulties in gaining electoral support or being considered for leadership roles.

Educational experiences emerged as a key theme in the data. Informants described limited access to formal education for *Iri-ri* communities during the colonial and New Order periods, when schooling was largely accessible to *Mel-mel* families. One informant recounted concealing her *Iri-ri* identity in order to gain access to secondary education in Tual during the 1990s. Field observations further documented social distance between children from different strata beginning in early childhood educational settings.

Stigmas related to cleanliness and physical labor were also documented. Historically, *Iri-ri* individuals predominantly worked as farmers, carpenters, and manual laborers. Informants described social avoidance related to food-sharing practices, particularly prior to the reform era. Although these practices have declined, some informants noted that residual discomfort persists among certain upper-stratum members.

Table 2. Forms of stigma experienced by Iri-ri group (Based on field data)

Domain	Descriptive Form of Stigma
Labor	Association with menial work
Education	Perceived lack of educational worthiness
Cleanliness	Stereotypes related to hygiene
Politics	Limited electoral support
Religion	Restricted access to leadership roles

The data summarized in Table 2 indicate that stigma experienced by members of the *Iri-ri* group spans multiple domains of everyday life, including labor, education, cleanliness, political participation, and religious roles. These forms of stigma are not limited to a single sphere but are encountered across social, cultural, and institutional settings. Field observations further show that such stigmas are expressed through daily interactions, social distancing practices, and differential participation in communal activities. These patterns are also reflected in ritual contexts, where roles and forms of participation continue to follow established social distinctions, as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 2. Ancestral tomb pilgrimage preparation ritual (Led by Mel-mel group and followed by Iri-ri)

Observations of religious practices show that caste distinctions are present in ritual roles and spatial arrangements. Informants reported that leadership roles in mosques and traditional rituals are predominantly occupied by individuals from the *Mel-mel* group. Field observations in mosques showed that *Mel-mel* congregants typically occupy the front rows, while *Ren-ren* and *Iri-ri* members tend to position themselves in the middle or back areas. One informant described this practice as follows: "*…During Friday prayers or congregational prayers, the front rows are usually occupied by Mel-mel people and government officials from the Mel-mel community*". (Interview with YR).

Further field observations and interview data provide additional descriptions of how caste-based distinctions are experienced in everyday religious life. Several informants from the *Ren-ren* and *Iri-ri* groups described feelings of hesitation and self-restraint when participating in communal worship, particularly regarding spatial positioning within the mosque. One informant from the *Iri-ri* group explained: "*When we enter the mosque and see the front rows already empty, we usually choose to sit behind. Even if no one tells us directly, we understand where our place is.*" (Interview with MHD). Similar accounts were also conveyed by informants from the *Ren-ren* group, who noted that seating arrangements are shaped by long-standing habits rather than formal rules. An informant stated: "*There is no rule written anywhere, but people already know. Those from Mel-mel usually sit in front, and the others adjust themselves.*" (Interview with LHG).

Observations during traditional rituals further show similar patterns of role distribution. In ancestral pilgrimage and customary ceremonies, leadership roles such

as ritual coordinators, speakers, and ceremonial representatives were consistently held by individuals from the *Mel-mel* group. Members of the *Iri-ri* group were observed assisting with logistical preparations and ritual support activities. One informant described this arrangement as follows: *"In every ritual, the Mel-mel lead the ceremony. We help prepare things, carry equipment, and follow the instructions given."* (Interview with MGF)

Data on political participation describe changes in local political involvement following Indonesia's reform era. Informants reported that while *Mel-mel* individuals historically dominated bureaucratic and political positions, increasing numbers of individuals from the *Iri-ri* group have entered local political leadership roles since the early 2000s. By 2023, several regency heads were reported to originate from *Iri-ri* backgrounds.

Field observations during local election periods further show that political actors increasingly engage *Iri-ri* communities through public meetings, door-to-door visits, and the inclusion of local figures in campaign teams. Informants from the *Iri-ri* group described greater involvement in campaign activities and decision-making processes. One informant noted: *"Before, people like us were only asked to support. Now we are invited to sit in meetings, to speak, and sometimes to run as candidates."* (Interview with YR).

Additional observations indicate that increased political engagement has also altered everyday interactions between caste groups during electoral periods. Informants reported that campaign events in *Iri-ri* neighbourhoods are now attended by political figures from different caste backgrounds, including candidates from the *Mel-mel* group. During these events, *Iri-ri* community members were observed taking active roles as coordinators, speakers, and local mobilizers. Several informants noted that meetings were no longer limited to symbolic participation but involved direct discussion of local issues and collective decision-making related to electoral strategies.

2. Discussion

Recent transformations in Kei society suggest that the caste system is no longer operating as a rigid and immutable structure, particularly in urban contexts such as Tual City and Langgur. Everyday interactions increasingly display more fluid social relations, and explicit references to caste boundaries appear less dominant in daily communication. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that such apparent softening does not imply the disappearance of caste as a social logic. Instead, caste continues to function subtly and systematically through customary institutions, ritual

practices, bureaucratic arrangements, and symbolic forms of authority. In this sense, caste in Kei society has not dissolved but has been rearticulated in ways that allow it to coexist with processes of modernization, education, and local democratization. This ambivalent condition provides an important empirical entry point for examining how power, culture, and communication intersect in post-traditional societies.

From a Gramscian perspective, the persistence of caste in Kei society can be understood as a form of hegemony that operates primarily through consent rather than coercion (Gramsci, 1971). The *Mel-mel* group has historically occupied positions of symbolic and institutional dominance, not merely by controlling material resources or formal authority, but by shaping the normative frameworks through which social order is perceived as legitimate. Customary law (adat), ritual hierarchies, and inherited leadership roles function as ideological apparatuses that normalize inequality and render it morally acceptable. The findings regarding marriage regulations, ritual leadership, and bureaucratic representation illustrate how caste boundaries are reproduced through everyday practices that appear natural and unquestioned. The asymmetrical social sanctions surrounding cross-caste relationships, particularly those involving gendered power relations, exemplify how hegemony operates through selective tolerance and moral double standards that protect elite interests while disciplining subordinate groups.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence further illuminates how domination in Kei society is internalized and reproduced without overt force (Bourdieu, 1991). The *Mel-mel* group's control over symbolic capital—such as noble lineage, customary legitimacy, and access to bureaucratic positions—intersects with cultural capital in the form of education and institutional literacy, as well as social capital embedded in patronage networks (Jannah et al., 2023; Ikbal et al., 2024). These forms of capital collectively shape a habitus that predisposes *Mel-mel* actors to perceive leadership as their natural entitlement, while *Ren-ren* and *Iri-ri* actors often internalize dispositions of subordination and self-limitation. The study's findings on village labor organization, bureaucratic exclusion, and ritual role distribution demonstrate how such habitus is enacted in practice, reinforcing structural inequalities through routine interactions. Importantly, this symbolic violence is effective precisely because it is misrecognized as legitimate social order rather than domination.

At the same time, the data reveal that hegemonic domination in Kei society is neither total nor uncontested. Gramsci's notion of counter-hegemony is evident in moments where subordinate groups negotiate, resist, or subtly disrupt established hierarchies (Gramsci, 1971). Acts of collective disobedience in village labor, the emergence of educated *Iri-ri* youth, and increasing political participation from marginalized groups reflect cracks within the hegemonic structure. These practices do not necessarily take the form of overt confrontation but often manifest as gradual reconfigurations of meaning and authority. Such dynamics resonate with Scott's (2000) concept of hidden transcripts, wherein resistance is expressed through informal, symbolic, or context-specific actions that challenge domination without directly confronting power holders.

The persistence of caste without large-scale open conflict in Kei society raises a critical question regarding social order and stability. Despite deep structural inequalities and long-standing stigmatization of the *Iri-ri* group, overt inter-caste violence has been remarkably limited. This phenomenon suggests the presence of a culturally embedded communicative framework that enables coexistence under conditions of inequality. Drawing on communication theory, particularly Curran's (2006) insights, this study argues that intracultural communication has functioned as a key mechanism for maintaining social order. Through shared symbols, rituals, and narratives, Kei society has developed a communicative system that allows different caste groups to understand their respective positions, obligations, and expectations. Such communication does not eliminate inequality but renders it manageable and socially intelligible (Faiz et al., 2023; Nwabueze & Gasiokwu, 2024; Hakim et al., 2024).

Intracultural communication, as conceptualized by Gudykunst and Kim (2003), involves the exchange of meanings within a cultural group that is internally differentiated by power relations. In Kei society, this form of communication has historically facilitated the acceptance of caste as a reasonable and even necessary framework for collective life. Traditional and religious elites have played a central role in legitimizing caste norms by embedding them within moral discourses, ritual obligations, and narratives of ancestral authority. As Shrivastava et al. (2022) note, cultural hierarchies often persist when they are successfully framed as integral to

social harmony. The findings of this study support this argument by showing how caste-based roles are continually reaffirmed through ritual participation, religious practices, and everyday communicative routines.

The sacredization of caste constitutes a particularly powerful dimension of this hegemonic process. Over centuries, caste distinctions in Kei society have been naturalized through ceremonies associated with birth, marriage, death, and religious observance (Mohammed, 2025; Iswantoro et al., 2024). These rituals imbue caste with transcendental significance, linking social hierarchy to ancestral authority and supernatural consequences. Bustanuddin Agus (2006) conceptualizes such sacredness as a foundational element of religious belief, one that generates resignation and acceptance toward social arrangements perceived as divinely sanctioned. Similarly, Alo Liliweri (2015) emphasizes that cultural systems often persist because they are framed as natural mechanisms for maintaining social equilibrium. In Kei society, caste functions not only as a social structure but also as a moral cosmology that defines order, obligation, and belonging.

Weber's (1968) analysis of religion and social stratification further clarifies how sacred beliefs operate differently across social strata. For privileged groups, religious and cultural narratives serve to legitimize authority and maintain dominance, while for subordinate groups, they offer symbolic compensation for material deprivation. The findings of this study reflect this dual function. While *Mel-mel* actors draw on sacred traditions to justify leadership and ritual authority, *Ren-ren* and *Iri-ri* actors often interpret the same traditions as frameworks for endurance, moral worth, and communal belonging. Robertson Smith's perspective on ritual as a mechanism for intensifying social solidarity (as cited in Koentjaraningrat, 1993) helps explain why caste-based rituals, despite their hierarchical nature, continue to be valued as expressions of collective identity.

Economic relations further reinforce intracultural communication and interdependence among caste groups. The study's findings on labor arrangements, land management, and patron–client relationships demonstrate that economic dependence has historically functioned as a stabilizing force within the caste system. The *Iri-ri* group's role as house people, laborers, and dependent farmers reflects a form of structural subordination that is simultaneously exploitative and protective. Although such arrangements limit economic mobility, they also provide a degree of

social security within a context of limited resources. This dynamic aligns with Eric Wolf's notion of dependent cultivators, as discussed by Scott (1993), wherein subordinate groups maintain cooperative relationships with elites to ensure survival. In Kei society, economic dependence thus reinforces caste hierarchies while simultaneously fostering a sense of mutual reliance that discourages open conflict.

Political reform and democratization since the early 2000s have significantly altered these dynamics. The opening of electoral spaces has required broader participation, compelling traditional elites to engage with previously marginalized groups (Mun'im et al., 2025; Aidonojie et al., 2025; Abdullah & Fernando, 2023). The increasing political visibility of the *Iri-ri* group represents a critical shift in the communicative and symbolic dimensions of power. Intracultural communication has become an arena for renegotiating meanings of leadership, legitimacy, and representation. As Gudykunst and Kim (2003) argue, communication within unequal cultural groups is inherently tension-laden, capable of both reinforcing and transforming power relations. In the Kei context, electoral participation has enabled the *Iri-ri* group to convert demographic strength into symbolic and political capital, challenging long-standing assumptions about caste-based leadership.

James Carey's (2007) conception of communication as a symbolic process that constructs social reality is particularly relevant here. The findings indicate that political participation has not merely redistributed power but has reshaped the narratives through which caste identities are understood. As Nakayama and Halualani (2011) suggest, intracultural communication must be viewed as a contested field rather than a neutral exchange. Through political discourse, public rituals, and everyday interactions, *Iri-ri* actors increasingly articulate alternative identities that resist inherited stigmas. These communicative practices do not abolish caste but destabilize its symbolic foundations, opening space for social mobility and redefinition (Larasati, 2025; Ikbal et al., 2024; Iswantoro et al., 2024).

Theoretically, this study contributes to ongoing debates on caste, communication, and social change by demonstrating that caste systems should not be understood solely as static structures of domination or as cultural remnants destined for disappearance. Instead, caste in Kei society operates as a dynamic communicative system that is continually negotiated through interactions shaped by education, economic change, and democratization. This perspective moves beyond binary

interpretations of tradition versus modernity and highlights the dual role of culture as both a source of domination and a site of transformation.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the local context of Kei society. Similar patterns of culturally legitimized inequality can be observed in caste systems in India (Natrajan, 2022; Thapa et al., 2021), ethnic hierarchies in parts of Africa (Vitturini, 2020), and the marginalization of indigenous communities across the Global South. Fraser's (2009) and Kymlicka's (1995) analyses of minority rights underscore how structural exclusion often persists through cultural and institutional mechanisms, even within democratic frameworks. The Kei case illustrates how modernization and democratization do not automatically dismantle inherited hierarchies but instead interact with them in complex and often contradictory ways (Bourdieu, 1991; Gramsci, 1971; Abdullah & Fernando, 2023).

In this sense, the Kei experience resonates with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) and Giddens's (1991) discussions of reflexive modernity, where traditional structures are neither fully abandoned nor entirely preserved but reworked through new social practices. The findings highlight how marginalized groups can leverage education, communication, and political participation to challenge symbolic boundaries without necessarily rejecting cultural identity. This ambivalence constitutes a key contribution of the study, demonstrating that social transformation in post-traditional societies often proceeds through negotiation rather than rupture.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the ethnographic and contextual nature of the research limits the generalizability of findings beyond the Kei community. While the study offers analytical insights with broader relevance, it does not claim to represent all indigenous or caste-based societies. Second, the researcher's long-term engagement with the community, although beneficial for depth and trust, carries the risk of relational bias, even though triangulation and informant confirmation were employed to mitigate this concern. Third, the analysis primarily reflects the perspectives of adult social actors, leaving the experiences of younger generations and women—particularly in digital and transnational contexts—less explored.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that caste in Kei society cannot be adequately understood either as a static remnant of tradition or as a social structure that is

gradually disappearing under the pressures of modernization. Instead, the findings reveal that caste operates as a dynamic socio-cultural formation that is continuously reproduced and contested through intracultural communication. Ritual practices, economic relations, bureaucratic arrangements, and political participation function as communicative arenas in which social hierarchy is maintained, normalized, and at the same time selectively renegotiated. In this context, caste persists not merely because of coercion, but because it is embedded in everyday meanings, interactions, and institutional practices that shape social order.

By engaging critically with theories of hegemony, symbolic violence, and intracultural communication, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how power operates through cultural and communicative processes. The analysis shows that domination in Kei society is sustained through the internalization of norms and values that render inequality socially acceptable, while opportunities for resistance emerge through education, economic mobility, and political participation. The increasing involvement of the *Iri-ri* group in local politics illustrates how marginalized actors can utilize communicative and institutional spaces to challenge inherited stigmas and renegotiate their social positions without necessarily rejecting cultural traditions. This finding highlights the ambivalent role of culture as both a mechanism of domination and a resource for social transformation.

Based on the limitations acknowledged in this study, future research should broaden the analytical scope by adopting comparative approaches across different indigenous or caste-based societies to examine whether similar communicative dynamics are present in other contexts. In addition, given the ethnographic depth and long-term engagement involved in this research, further studies could employ multi-researcher or collaborative designs to reduce potential relational bias. Moreover, subsequent research would benefit from greater attention to the experiences of younger generations and women, particularly in relation to digital communication, transnational mobility, and emerging forms of identity negotiation that were not fully explored in this study.

Ultimately, this study affirms that caste in Kei society is best understood as a communicative process rather than a fixed social structure, in which power, identity, and social order are continuously negotiated. By foregrounding intracultural communication as a key analytical lens, the study underscores that meaningful social

change in post-traditional societies often unfolds not through abrupt rupture, but through ongoing reinterpretation, negotiation, and reconfiguration of cultural meanings within everyday social life.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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. All authors confirm that this research was conducted independently and objectively, without any commercial or institutional pressure. There were no personal relationships or circumstances that could have affected the research process, data interpretation, or the conclusions drawn. The authors also affirm that the integrity, transparency, and ethical standards of academic research have been fully upheld throughout the study.

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