

Ethnic Identity, Language Revitalization, and Intercultural Education among the Urak Lawoi in Thailand

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Abstract: This article examines a long-term, community-based effort to strengthen ethnic recognition and address educational inequity among the Urak Lawoi, an indigenous Austronesian-speaking community on Lanta Island, Southern Thailand. Situated within a complex interethnic context involving Thai Muslims, Thai Chinese, and Southern Thai populations, the study explores how language revitalization, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), and Intercultural Education (ICE) have been integrated over more than fifteen years through participatory action research guided by the Mahidol Model. Drawing on ethnographic documentation, educational interventions, and reflective analysis, the article demonstrates how the use of a Thai-based Urak Lawoi orthography, culturally grounded curricula, and intercultural learning spaces contributed to strengthening ethnic identity, cultural confidence, and social inclusion. At the same time, it critically examines ongoing tensions related to language maintenance, assimilationist pressures, and the sustainability of community-based educational initiatives. By foregrounding education as a key site for recognizing and embracing ethnic identity within broader interethnic relations, this case contributes to social science debates on educational justice, interculturality, and minority recognition in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Keywords: Mother Tongue-Based Education (MTB-MLE), Intercultural Education (ICE), language revitalization, ethnic identity, educational justice

Ethnic and linguistic diversity constitutes an integral part of Thailand's cultural landscape. However, minority communities frequently face systemic challenges that hinder their cultural survival and access to equitable education. One such group is the Urak Lawoi, an Austronesian-speaking Indigenous community residing primarily in coastal areas and islands of Southern Thailand, including Lanta Island. Despite the country's rich linguistic diversity—with over 70 indigenous languages historically spoken—Thailand has long provided limited policy support for minority languages. Many of these languages are now critically endangered,

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largely due to assimilationist education policies and broader sociopolitical marginalization (Premsrirat, 2006, 2007).

Over generations, the Urak Lawoi have endured intense sociocultural and linguistic pressures, including state-led integration, economic exclusion, and the dominant cultural influence of Thai Muslims, Thai Chinese, and Southern Thai populations. These forces have significantly undermined the sustainability of their language, traditional knowledge systems, and cultural practices.

In response to these challenges, a transformative and participatory approach combining language revitalization, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), and Intercultural Education (ICE) has been implemented on Lanta Island for over 15 years. This integrated strategy aims not only to reduce educational disparities but also to reinforce the Urak Lawoi community's cultural identity, agency, and recognition within Thai society.

Since 2010, a total of five participatory research and development projects have been conducted to revitalize the Urak Lawoi language and culture at both the community and school levels in Lanta Island¹. These projects laid the groundwork for the establishment of Urak Lawoi MTB-MLE, first piloted at the kindergarten level in Sangka-U School—the core educational institution of the Urak Lawoi community. Over the past 15 years, these initiatives have evolved into a comprehensive model that integrates community knowledge with formal education, rooted in culturally responsive pedagogy, local wisdom, and intercultural learning.

A key framework guiding these efforts is the Mahidol Model for Language Revitalization and Maintenance, developed by Professor Suwilai Premsrirat and the Center for Documentation and Revitalization of Endangered Languages and Cultures (CD-RELC) at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University (Premsrirat, 2007, 2008, 2018). The process began with the development of an orthography for the Urak Lawoi language, facilitating linguistic documentation, intergenerational transmission, and educational integration. This foundation enabled the creation of curricula, teacher training programs, and learner-centered educational models that embed the Urak Lawoi language and cultural knowledge into both formal and non-formal education.

The expansion of this effort into intercultural education (ICE), particularly across 14 schools in Lanta Island—has created inclusive platforms that foster dialogue, mutual understanding, and social cohesion among ethnically diverse learners. ICE initiatives such as cultural camps, project-based learning (PBL), and the integration of local wisdom into core subjects have established Cultural Safe Spaces, empowering ethnic minority students and enriching majority students' understanding of cultural diversity.

This paper explores how the integration of language revitalization, MTB-MLE, and ICE has contributed to the recognition of ethnic identity, social inclusion, and the empowerment of the Urak Lawoi. Drawing on a case study grounded in community-based and action research; it analyzes the processes and impacts of this educational transformation. The findings underscore the potential of culturally responsive and community-driven education in bridging cultural gaps and advancing educational justice for ethnolinguistic minority groups within national systems.

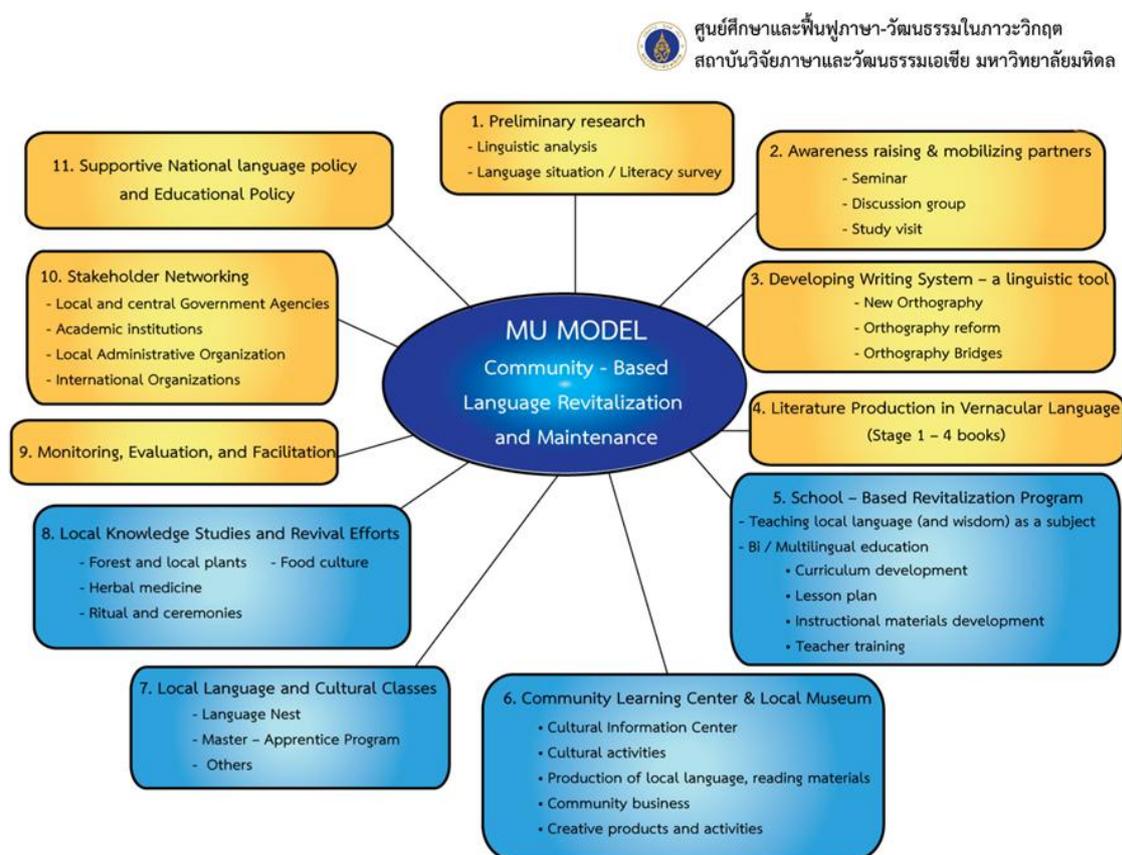
Literature Review

Community Empowerment through Language and culture revitalization

The concept of language and cultural revitalization in Thailand is attributed to Suwilai Premsrirat, known as the "Mahidol Model". (Premsrirat, 2018). The Mahidol Model is based on three long-term goals: language documentation, language revitalization through community organization and collection, and the development and implementation of a forward-looking

national language policy. First, academics, linguistic staff and students and language speakers are being encouraged to document as much as possible the language, culture and oral traditions of languages at risk before they are lost forever. Second, the language speakers/ethnolinguistic communities are being encouraged to conduct language revitalization programs with technical support of academics (linguists, anthropologists, education experts and so on). Third, academics are involved in implementation plans for the new National Language Policy to facilitate and support the use of ethnic minority languages in daily life, media and education, alongside the national language (Thai) and international language.

Figure 1
Mahidol language revitalization model (Premsrirat, 2018)



Mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTB-MLE)

Thailand is home to over 70 ethnolinguistic communities, yet mainstream education has historically privileged the Thai language to the exclusion of minority languages. Such assimilationist language policies have significantly contributed to educational underachievement, cultural marginalization, and language endangerment among ethnolinguistic minority children (Premsrirat, 2006; 2007; UNICEF, 2018). In recent decades, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has been recognized as a transformative approach that fosters both cognitive development and sociocultural inclusion for learners from non-dominant language backgrounds (Premsrirat & Burarungrot, 2021; Person & Burarungrot, 2025).

MTB-MLE is grounded in theories of bilingualism and inclusive education which posit that the use of learners’ first language in early education not only facilitates conceptual

understanding and literacy acquisition but also enhances learning in additional languages (Cummins, 2009; Malone, 2016). Core principles of MTB-MLE include the development of orthographies for unwritten languages, production of culturally relevant materials, teacher training, and community engagement, all of which aim to position the mother tongue as a legitimate medium of instruction and cultural identity (Thomas & Collier, 1997; Person & Burarungrot, 2025).

One of the most prominent examples of MTB-MLE implementation in Thailand is the Patani Malay–Thai MTB-MLE Project, led by Mahidol University in collaboration with UNICEF. This initiative developed a standardized Thai-script orthography for Patani Malay and introduced bilingual instructional materials for use in kindergarten and early primary classrooms. Owing to the continued vitality of Patani Malay within Muslim Malay communities in the Deep South, the project benefitted from strong intergenerational language transmission, a broad base of fluent speakers, and high levels of community engagement and acceptance (Premsrirat & Burarungrot, 2018; Samoh et al., 2024). Its impacts included measurable improvements in student literacy, enhanced learner engagement, and strengthened relationships between schools and local communities (UNICEF, 2018).

In contrast, the Urak Lawoi MTB-MLE and Intercultural Education (ICE) Project on Lanta Island faced a markedly different sociolinguistic context. The Urak Lawoi language, spoken by a small Austronesian fishing community, is critically endangered. Many children have limited proficiency in the language, and there are few fluent adult speakers capable of serving as language teachers. Furthermore, the dominant Thai-speaking populations—comprising Southern Thai Buddhists, Muslims, and Thai Chinese—have historically lacked awareness of the Urak Lawoi’s distinct linguistic identity. As a result, members of the community often experienced linguistic stigma and refrained from using their language in public settings (CD-RELC, 2025b; Person & Burarungrot, 2025).

Given these challenges, the implementation of MTB-MLE in Lanta Island required substantial adaptation. The project, which originated in 2010 under the Mahidol Model for language revitalization, began with the development of an orthography using Thai script, followed by local material creation, curriculum design, and the training of Urak Lawoi youth as teaching assistants. While the Patani Malay project emphasized strengthening language use within an already vibrant speech community, the Lanta initiative prioritized the revitalization of a fragile linguistic heritage in parallel with education reform.

Importantly, the Urak Lawoi case illustrates that language revitalization alone is insufficient in contexts where minority languages are both endangered and socially marginalized. In such cases, education must also serve as a vehicle for intercultural recognition. Thus, the project strategically integrated Intercultural Education (ICE) alongside MTB-MLE to foster mutual respect and cultural understanding among all students. This approach allowed for the creation of inclusive learning spaces, “Cultural Safe Spaces” where ethnic minority learners could reclaim their identity, and majority peers could engage with linguistic and cultural diversity. The conceptual foundations and practices of ICE will be further elaborated in the next section.

Intercultural Education (ICE)

The term Intercultural Education is marked by the adjective intercultural, indicating an educational framework that engages with multiple cultures and, crucially, the relationships and interactions between them. Consequently, the conceptualization of Intercultural Education is directly shaped by how culture itself is understood (Conti, 2025; Liu, 2023). Moreover, Bhikhu Parekh said in the concept of multicultural education that “education is therefore an education in freedom—freedom from inherited biases and narrow feelings and sentiments, as well as

freedom to explore other cultures and perspectives and make one's own choices in full awareness of available and practicable alternatives” (The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, n.d.).

The concept of Intercultural Education (ICE), as outlined by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, is grounded in the core aims of the curriculum. It is designed for all children and emphasizes the development of knowledge and understanding, essential skills and capacities, as well as appropriate attitudes and values. Intercultural education is not a stand-alone subject but is integrated across all areas of learning and within the broader life of the school. It requires a focus on real-world contexts, recognizing that language plays a central role in developing intercultural competencies (Mitropoulo et al., 2014). This form of education is a gradual process that takes time, and the school context plays a vital role in supporting effective learning all children. It nurtures curiosity about cultural and social diversity, supports the development of imagination by normalizing differences, and enhances critical thinking by encouraging children to reflect on and question their own cultural practices. Furthermore, it fosters sensitivity and empathy and plays a significant role in the prevention of racism.

In this part of the content, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment stated that it is embedded in the Primary School Curriculum. As such, intercultural education can be addressed in a cross-curricular manner, encompassing all subject areas. The integration of intercultural content across the curriculum provides children with a more coherent and richer learning experience. It is also more likely that children will develop appropriate attitudes and values if these are integrated across subject areas and throughout school life, rather than being addressed in a piecemeal or 'one-off' manner. There are five themes for ICE, such as (1) Identity and Belonging, (2) Similarity and Difference, (3) Human Rights and Responsibilities, (4) Discrimination and Equality, and (5) Conflict and Conflict Resolution.

Case and Methodology

Community-based research

The focus of the Mahidol Model is to put community members at the heart of revitalization efforts through involvement in almost all steps of the revitalization process such as orthography development, creation of local vernacular literature, collection of local knowledge and instruction of the language to the next generation of speakers. It is based on more than 10 years of working experience with the cooperation of 30 language groups and the technical and moral support of the Mahidol University research facilitator team. (Premsrirat, 2018)

The Urak Lawoi' language and culture revitalization began in 2010 and is part of what is generally known as the Mahidol Model, which is based on community-based research (CBR) methodology, with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). The strategy used in the community-based research emphasizes problem-solving and community participation. The community researchers, as well as the owners of the research projects, comprise members of the community. They are supported by facilitators from researchers (Mahidol staff) who offer advice, thus helping them complete their research. (Laparporn, 2018)

Action research

The Urak Lawoi language revitalization and educational development on Lanta Island employed a participatory action research (PAR) framework, aligning with the Mahidol Model for language revitalization. This approach emphasized the co-construction of knowledge, empowerment of community actors, and iterative cycles of reflection, planning,

implementation, and evaluation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Stringer, 2007). Throughout the 15-year period, five interrelated research initiatives were conducted between 2010 and 2024, each aimed at strengthening the linguistic and cultural agency of the Urak Lawoi through collaboration between local leaders, educators, youth, and academic institutions.

The action research methodology adopted here was grounded in community engagement and capacity building. It involved the systematic training of various stakeholder groups, including village leaders, elders, youth, schoolteachers, and education officers, through structured workshops, mentoring sessions, and co-teaching models. These activities supported both the technical aspects of language revitalization—such as the development of Thai-based orthography—and the sociocultural components of curriculum and material production rooted in local knowledge.

The action research unfolded across four main iterative cycles:

Cycle (1) Participatory Assessment and Planning: Community consultations, including meetings with Urak Lawoi elders, youth, and teachers, were conducted to assess language vitality, document cultural heritage, and co-design project goals. A baseline survey revealed low language confidence among children, prompting an emphasis on identity and pride in the project's direction.

Cycle (2) Capacity Building and Material Development: Workshops supported the development of bilingual Urak Lawoi–Thai materials—such as storybooks and picture dictionaries—and trained local youth as teacher assistants (TAs). Lessons were co-designed to integrate oral traditions and local ecological knowledge.

Cycle (3) Implementation of MTB-MLE and ICE in Schools: Pilot teaching began at Sangka-U School with TAs and teachers co-facilitating classes. Simultaneously, ICE strategies were launched in 14 Lanta Island schools through project-based learning, cultural activities, and inclusive teacher training.

Cycle (4) Reflection, Evaluation, and Strategic Adjustment: Monitoring and evaluation activities were conducted through classroom observations, interviews, and reflection sessions with stakeholders. These processes were especially critical during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted in-person learning and highlighted the need for flexible, community-rooted educational responses. The data informed curriculum revisions and helped scale up ICE integration across subject areas.

The action research process not only strengthened linguistic skills and cultural identity among Urak Lawoi children but also fostered broader community awareness and recognition of their heritage. Such collaborative processes were essential in overcoming linguistic stigma, reshaping local narratives, and promoting inclusion within the island's diverse sociocultural landscape.

Context of Lanta Island

Geographical of Lanta Island

Koh Lanta is a district in Krabi Province in southern Thailand. Koh Lanta is approximately 40 kilometres long and 6 kilometres wide, with mountains surrounding the beach. The Koh Lanta archipelago comprises 16 large and small islands, including Koh Lanta Noi, Koh Lanta Yai, and Koh Klang. The climate is tropical rainforest, characterised by two distinct seasons: summer and the rainy season. The summer or the tourist season is from October to May. Koh Lanta has natural attractions that attract tourists. There are beautiful diving spots. Important tourist attractions on Koh Lanta include natural sites such as Koh Lanta National Park, Koh Kwang Beach, and Khlong Dao Beach, which are popular destinations for foreign tourists to unwind on the island. In addition, Koh Lanta is home to a diverse population

of multilingual and multicultural groups, including Southern Thais, Thai Muslims, Thai Chinese, and the Urak Lawoi. There is a cultural area at the centre of all four groups of communities, known as Lanta Old Town. (Laparporn & Burarungrot, 2025)

According to district-level administrative records and community-based surveys, Koh Lanta is home to an estimated population of approximately 30,000–35,000 residents, comprising four major ethnocultural groups. Thai Muslims constitute the largest group, accounting for approximately 60–65% of the population, followed by Southern Thai Buddhists (20–25%), Thai Chinese (8–10%), and the Urak Lawoi, who number approximately 2,500–3,000 people, residing mainly in coastal villages such as Sangka-U, Hua Laem, and surrounding areas.

This demographic configuration shapes everyday interethnic relations on the island and has direct implications for language use, educational access, and cultural recognition.

History of groups on Lanta Island

Urak Lawoi

The Urak Lawoi are the first ethnic group to settle in the Lanta archipelago. According to the testimony of the elderly Urak Lawoi, they said that they were a group that migrated from Gunung Jerai, Malaysia, and landed at the old Sri Raya district (currently the Lanta old town). They built houses in small groups until the Thai Chinese and Thai Muslims moved in, causing the Urak Lawoi to gradually retreat to the end of the island, from the Sri Raya community to Ban Hua Laem, Ao Sangka U, Ao Phrao, Ao Kuan, Ao Marae, and Ao Klong Po.

The Urak Lawoi people use the Urak Lawoi language to communicate. There is no written script. Most of the elderly and middle-aged people can still communicate in the Urak Lawoi language. However, most of the youth or young children use Thai language to communicate because they are educated in schools and are influenced by various media. They are considered a group whose language and culture are in crisis. Therefore, academics and the community have been reviving their own language and local wisdom since 2010 until now by creating a writing system to be a tool for recording the language and local knowledge, including using it in teaching and learning in schools. (Ukrit, 2011)

Thai Muslim

Muslims constitute the largest population on Koh Lanta. Some immigrated from the Strait of Malacca and others from Satun Province during the British colonial era. They settled in Sri Raya Bay, where it offered good shelter from the wind. Later, as the Muslim population grew, they spread out and acquired more land for farming and trade.

Most Muslims work in a variety of occupations, including gardening, fishing, and running businesses, as well as in restaurants and the tourism industry.

Muslims on Koh Lanta adhere to Islamic principles and ethical principles, which guide their daily life from waking up until bedtime. Like other Muslims, these principles encompass greetings, attire, and dietary practices, based on the beliefs and teachings of Islam. (Ukrit, 2011, p.78)

Thai Chinese

Most of the Chinese population on Koh Lanta is Hokkien, with some Hainanese also present. Most Chinese descendants have now assimilated into Thai communities, adopting Thai ethnicity and nationality. Hokkien Chinese on Koh Lanta initially travelled from mainland

China, fleeing war and economic hardship, to earn a living on Penang Island. Later, a group of Chinese fishermen travelled to Koh Lanta to collect fish for sale in Penang and Singapore. During the monsoon, they stopped at the bay near Sri Raya Market, which offers shelter from storms and monsoons and is rich in natural resources. Later, more relatives and siblings came to trade, marry, and settle.

Most Hokkien Chinese on Koh Lanta are employed in boatbuilding, charcoal production, and trading. Hainanese Chinese work in goldsmithing, barbering, and coffee shops, contributing to their economic well-being. They have established permanent homes and large ships for transporting goods to Penang and Singapore. Exports include firewood, mangrove bark, dried coconuts, and other locally produced goods. On the return trip, they bring goods from Penang and Singapore to Koh Lanta, including salt, turmeric, soybean paste, canned food, and household items such as stone mortars, rice cookers, and lamps. There is also a mangrove charcoal industry for export, making Koh Lanta an important port city with economic stability.

Chinese people on Koh Lanta have joined together to build the "Sam Tong Ong" shrine as a place for performing rituals according to the beliefs of the Chinese group. It is in the Sri Raya Market area. Important traditions, such as the Chinese New Year and the Moon Festival, are held here. (Ukrit, 2011)

Southern Thai

During the establishment of Koh Lanta District, numerous government facilities were established, including a customs checkpoint, a district office, a police station, a school, a post office, and various public utilities. During this period, Siamese people from the mainland came to trade and flee to Koh Lanta. Civil servants also resided in the government housing areas around the district office and customs checkpoint, or the current Sri Raya Market. In 1947, bridges and roads connecting to other provinces diminished the importance of seaborne trade, leading to the abolition of the customs checkpoint and the relocation of most civil servants. Today, however, Koh Lanta has become a major tourist destination, attracting a growing number of Thais to the tourism service sector.

The traditions and culture of Thai Buddhists largely adhere to central Buddhist principles, such as Songkran, merit-making ceremonies, and Loi Krathong. (Ukrit, 2011)

Language and Culture Revitalization of Urak Lawoi

The Urak Lawoi people reside on various islands, particularly on the western coast of the southern part of the country, including Koh Lanta in Krabi Province, Koh Lipe in Satun Province, and Rawai Beach in Phuket Province. They have a population of approximately 3,000 people. The Urak Lawoi language is a small language spoken by a small minority of people living in a remote and rugged area, surrounded by other languages and cultures. Therefore, the Urak Lawoi language is in crisis and at high risk of extinction due to the dramatic changes in both language characteristics and language use, resulting from the influence of mass media, education systems, and socio-economic conditions. Young speakers or youth groups are increasingly turning to speaking the primary language in their daily lives, and their knowledge of their mother tongue is significantly reduced. (Premsrirat, 2004)

The Urak Lawoi community in Ban Sangka-U, Koh Lanta Yai Subdistrict, Koh Lanta District, Krabi Province, recognizes the value and importance of their language, culture, and local wisdom, which are on the verge of extinction. Therefore, they have come together to revive their language and local wisdom. This initiative involves conducting research for the local community, supported by funding from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). The primary goal is to slow the death of the language and the loss of local wisdom, with native speakers

personally implementing the process. This process has enabled the community to become more aware of the revitalization of their ethnic language and wisdom, while also building community confidence and strength.

Making the writing system

The process of language and local wisdom revitalization started in 2010 to make the writing system that the first step for revitalizing the language and local wisdom through the creation of a local language writing system using one Thai letter to represent one sound as an important tool for recording their knowledge of the language and local wisdom, resulting in a system for writing initial consonants, final consonants, and vowels.

The development of the Urak Lawoi writing system involved collaboration between linguistics scholars from the CD-RELC, RILCA, Mahidol University, and the native speakers in the community. This process enabled the native speakers to participate in determining their writing system, or alphabet. The result of the writing system is 22 initial consonants, 11 final consonants, eight single vowels, and two diphthongs. The next step was a workshop to train community writers, enabling native speakers to confidently and accurately use the writing system. This process began with practice in writing vocabulary, sentences, conversations, stories, and tales, ultimately leading to the recording of local knowledge and wisdom. Furthermore, the development of the Urak Lawoi writing system has brought immense pride to the Urak Lawoi community, particularly the community researchers, as it accurately reproduces the sounds of the language, particularly those not found in Thai. (Premsrirat et al., 2018. Thawanphat, M., Burarungrot, M., Samoh, U., & Rakwong, R. (2020).

The power of Urak Lawoi Youth through culture documentation

After developing the Urak Lawoi writing system in the Thai script, an essential tool for recording the language, community researchers, particularly the youth, were able to utilize the Urak Lawoi writing system effectively. Therefore, they were a key force in driving the revival of the language through ongoing local research. They began by recording stories and participating in the Boat Floating Ceremony (Ari Pajak), an essential ritual for the Urak Lawoi. The youth community researchers began data collection by participating in the boat floating ceremony, recording images and videos, and conducting interviews alongside local scholars and experts. The resulting book, "Ari Pajak," was compiled using the Urak Lawoi Thai script and its translation into the Thai language. (Premsrirat et al., 2018)

After that, in 2013, the community researchers, especially the youth group, carried out the project research of revitalizing the local language and wisdom by themselves under the name "Buaij De Laku Suka Buaij" (We learn that we love), focusing on enabling the youth group to learn through practical training and recording knowledge in the areas of their interest.

The youth research team divided into groups and selected three topics of interest to study: 1) livelihood tools, 2) Rammana dancing, and 3) local food. Each research team presented the origins and importance of their chosen topic. Each topic had a different study method, as follows:

1) Regarding tools for making a living, the research team consisted primarily of men with some experience at sea. They were interested in and practised making their tools for making a living. They chose fish traps, squid traps, and shrimp nets, all of which were suitable for use at sea. The research team then collaborated to document knowledge on various topics, including tools for making tools, the steps or methods for making these tools, their use, and precautions for using them. Throughout the study, the research team consulted with, inquired of, and received advice from scholars and experts continuously.

2) Regarding the Rammana dancing, the research team primarily consists of women interested in the art of Rammana dancing, including the musical instruments used in playing it. This group already has background and experience in Rammana dancing, enabling them to record data and knowledge. Some topics require questioning, such as the meaning of Rammana songs. The recording of knowledge about Rammana dancing encompasses various topics, including the origins of Rammana, performances, lyrics and their meanings, musical instruments used in performances, clothing, dance, changes in Rammana from past to present, and the lyrics themselves.

3) Local food is a new topic that youths rarely see or experience because most villagers no longer practice it. Furthermore, some dishes require ingredients that are difficult to find. Therefore, this research team consulted with experts and members of their own families, and experimented with local food preparation, enabling them to make delicious local dishes on their own. The local dishes the research team experimented with included 'khanom koi ti bao' (a kind of dessert), khanom koi ji jo (a kind of dessert), and ku lai kee si (rice and coconut milk curry). They recorded their knowledge, including the ingredients, preparation steps, and secrets to delicious dishes.

Output and outcome

The revival of the language and local wisdom of the Urak Lawoi people has yielded numerous outputs and outcomes that serve as an important resource for teaching the Urak Lawoi language in the future.

The revitalization of the Urak Lawoi language and culture has yielded significant outcomes, including the development of a standardized writing system using the Thai script, compilations of vocabulary, oral narratives, cultural texts, and educational materials such as big books and thematic booklets on local traditions, rituals, and livelihoods.

These efforts have contributed to broader community impacts. The Urak Lawoi language has been officially recognized as part of Thailand's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), reinforcing community identity and pride. Youth have emerged as key agents in sustaining cultural transmission, while increased recognition from local and governmental institutions has positioned Sangka-U Village as a community-based learning center for intercultural exchange.

Following the initial phase of orthography development and youth-led documentation between 2010 and 2013, the project experienced a period of reduced on-site engagement. When the research team re-entered the community after nearly a decade, notable changes were observed. While the Thai-based Urak Lawoi script continued to be recognized symbolically—particularly among youth involved in earlier documentation—daily language use remained fragile. Intergenerational transmission had not been fully restored, and formal schooling continued to privilege Thai as the dominant medium of instruction.

This gap points to an important limitation in language revitalization efforts. Although the development of orthography and youth engagement played a crucial role in raising awareness and symbolic recognition, these measures alone were insufficient to secure long-term language maintenance. Without sustained institutional support through schooling and broader educational reform, everyday language use remained fragile.

MTB-MLE Implementation for Urak Lawoi student

Building on earlier efforts in the revitalization of Urak Lawoi language and culture, the project successfully developed a Thai-based orthography and cultivated a group of Urak Lawoi youth who participated in designing culturally relevant learning materials. These foundational

outcomes supported the pilot implementation of MTB-MLE at Ban Sangka-U School, where Urak Lawoi children from kindergarten to primary levels are enrolled.

The MTB-MLE initiative followed a six-step participatory action research process:

(1) Curriculum Design: Co-created by teachers, local elders, and researchers, the curriculum aligned with Thailand's Early Childhood Education Standards while integrating Urak Lawoi language skills into daily lessons (30 minutes/day, 5 days/week).

(2) Material Development: Teaching materials included TPR (Total Physical Response) activities, traditional songs, picture stories, big books, electronic bilingual storybooks, and a primer for reading and writing in Urak Lawoi using Thai script. Content was later expanded for Grades 1–6.

(3) Teacher Recruitment and Training: Three teaching assistants and one local language expert were trained in instructional strategies and paired with regular classroom teachers.

(4) Implementation and Observation: Instruction started with oral skills and gradually moved to literacy through picture storytelling and big book reading, followed by character recognition and writing practice.

(5) Language Skills Assessment: Pre- and post-tests measured Thai and Urak Lawoi proficiency. Results showed significant improvement in both languages:

- Thai language: Pre-test average score: 57.4, Post-test: 80.2

- Urak Lawoi: Pre-test: 37.0, Post-test: 57.6

(6) Stakeholder Reflections: Teachers and school leaders reported increased student confidence, language pride, and greater use of Urak Lawoi in daily life.

"I believe that having a classroom to teach Urak Lawoi is a wonderful opportunity for children to learn their own language and carry it forward in today's world. Furthermore, it helps children absorb their own language more quickly. I think these children will come to appreciate the value of their own language and recognize its uniqueness when they interact with other societies in the world." Teaching Assistant for Urak Lawoi Language, Ban Sangka-U School
"When Urak Lawoi children at Ban Sangka-U School had the opportunity to learn their own language at school, we can clearly see that they speak Urak Lawoi more frequently, are prouder of their identities, and feel more confident when communicating with outsiders." Director of Ban Sangka-U School, Krabi Primary Educational Service Area Office.

While the MTB-MLE initiative marked a significant step forward, the impact remains limited to a single school. Without broader access to multilingual and intercultural education across Lanta Island, many children from diverse cultural groups—including Urak Lawoi, Southern Thai, Muslim, and Thai Chinese—lack opportunities to engage with their own and others' identities. This gap highlights the urgent need for a multilingual and intercultural education framework that promotes inclusion and equity (UNESCO, 2024; CD-RELC, 2025b). The need for Intercultural Education (ICE) is addressed further in the next section.

Intercultural Education in 14 schools at Lanta Island

As the island of Koh Lanta is home to four population groups: the Urak Lawoi, the Thai-Chinese, the Thai-Muslim, and the Thai-Southern, each with its cultural differences and diversity, the concept of intercultural education is important applied to schools on Koh Lanta, allowing students to learn about their own cultural identities and the culture and local wisdom of their peers from other groups.

ICE on Koh Lanta has been organized with learning activities starting with teacher training to provide teachers with knowledge and the ability to apply it to student learning activities in the classroom, based on five main content areas: 1) Identity and Belonging, 2) Similarity and Difference, 3) Human Rights and Responsibilities, 4) Discrimination and Equality and 5) Conflict and Conflict Resolution.

ICE on Koh Lanta has been organized in several formats, including:

1. ICE camps allow students to participate in collaborative activities, share perspectives and ideas, meet new friends from different schools, and exchange knowledge.
2. ICE integrates local wisdom and knowledge with various classroom subjects. For example, Ban Thung Yi Peng School organized a local wisdom learning activity on the production of shrimp paste, a renowned product of the Ban Thung Yi Peng community. A community scholar provided the knowledge. Afterwards, teachers integrated the activity into the Thai language subject by having students create mind maps related to the process of making shrimp paste and present them in English. Furthermore, the school integrated mathematics by learning about weighing, measuring, and gauging. After students participated in these learning activities, they and their teachers collaborated to produce a big book showcasing the process of making shrimp paste, which is the best-selling product on Koh Lanta. (CD-RELC, 2024)
3. ICE, by learning management in the form of project-based learning (PBL) projects, focuses on students' learning through Active Learning to develop thinking processes and open shared perspectives among students and teachers, using scientific processes and problem-solving, resulting in various innovations, enabling students to gain knowledge from self-study and gain new experiences. Teachers have a role as motivators, facilitators, advisors or coaches, facilitating learning by focusing on enabling students to design or produce practical projects. (CD-RELC, 2025a)

The PBL learning model on Koh Lanta comprises 22 projects across 11 schools on Koh Lanta. These projects are divided into three types:

1. PBL projects and ICE, such as the Urak Lawoi Friends Project at Ban Lang Sod School. This project designed a learning process for Ban Lang Sod School's students, who are predominantly Muslim, to learn from and exchange cultures with students from Ban Sang Ka U School, who are Urak Lawoi. The exchange included learning about the culture of dress, food, stories, and tales. Ban Lang Sod School students also collaborated in writing stories that reflect the Urak Lawoi lifestyle and culture.
2. PBL projects for developing and promoting Thai language skills are mostly projects related to early primary school (Grades 1 - 3). For example, Ban Khlong Nin School has created a board game called "Monopoly Game: Travelling to Koh Lanta" using Koh Lanta tourist attractions as maps on the board game. Players can own those places. When players travel to any location, they must read the tourist attraction cards every time. This game allows students to have fun while playing and practicing their Thai reading skills at the same time.
3. PBL Project and the Promotion of Urak Lawoi Language and Culture. Most of the groups that selected this type of PBL project were schools with Urak Lawoi students, including Ban Sangka-u School, Ban Saladan Community School, and Lanta Ratchapracha Uthit School. Each school focused on having students use the Urak Lawoi language to produce various innovations. For example, Ban Sangka-u School produced visual media and vocabulary in Urak Lawoi, Thai, and English. Ban Saladan Community School produced vocabulary cards and posted them in various areas of the school. Lanta Ratchapracha Uthit School divided students into groups to create giant storybooks in the Urak Lawoi language, serving as additional learning materials for students.

These activities have resulted in innovative learning products in various forms, such as vocabulary materials, storybooks, and various games that reflect the physical identity, culture, and lifestyle of the four groups of Koh Lanta residents. Furthermore, local products have been created for students to learn, experiment with, and sell to generate income, such as oyster chilli paste and sweet fish, which are considered adequate ways to preserve seafood.

The results have been shared among various groups, including community scholars, parents, teachers, and students. Details are as follows:

1. Community scholars play a key role in imparting knowledge or transferring local knowledge to students, fostering a sense of value and pride.
2. Community and school participation is fostered, fostering mutual reliance.
3. Teachers have learned about new teaching methods and active learning.
4. Teachers have learned new knowledge, particularly local wisdom within the community.
5. Students have learned about their own local identity and culture through hands-on practice.
6. Students have enjoyed learning.
7. Students have learned about other cultures and have had the opportunity to make new friends, gaining a deeper understanding of their peers' cultures, both similar and different from their own.

In organizing ICE as mentioned, by integrating with local wisdom knowledge, integrating with learning content and creating active learning, students have learned about their own identity, seen the value of their local wisdom knowledge, and also learned about the similarities and differences between their own culture and the cultures of friends from other cultures, which is consistent with theme identity and belonging and similarity and difference.

While Intercultural Education (ICE) has proven to be a valuable mechanism for fostering mutual understanding among diverse groups on Lanta Island, several challenges to long-term sustainability remain. These include reliance on external project funding, teacher turnover, limited institutionalization within the national curriculum, and uneven levels of policy support across schools.

In response to these challenges, the initiative has increasingly emphasized local ownership, teacher capacity building, and alignment with Thailand's National Language Policy and broader educational reform agendas. Embedding ICE within routine teaching practice rather than treating it as a stand-alone activity—has been a key strategy for sustaining intercultural learning beyond the formal project cycle.

Evidence of sustainability can be observed in the ways ICE project-based learning (ICE-PBL) practices have been taken up and maintained by schools themselves. Teachers and school administrators from three participating schools received regional-level recognition for their ICE-PBL initiatives, reflecting both institutional commitment and the integration of intercultural approaches into everyday pedagogy.

More importantly, at Sangka-U School and two other schools with Urak Lawoi students, the teaching of the Urak Lawoi language and the implementation of ICE-PBL activities have continued a regular basis even after external project funding ended. These practices have been sustained through existing school structures, teacher collaboration, and ongoing engagement with community knowledge holders.

Taken together, these developments suggest that although challenges related to funding and policy alignment persist, the combination of local ownership, teacher capacity building, and school-level leadership has enabled ICE and language-related activities to become embedded within everyday educational practice rather than remaining project-dependent.

Discussion

This study reaffirms the transformative potential of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and Intercultural Education (ICE) in reinforcing linguistic and cultural identity, while promoting inclusive education among ethnolinguistic minority communities. In the case of the Urak Lawoi on Lanta Island, the participatory development of a Thai-based orthography, the creation of locally grounded learning materials, and community-led teacher training collectively contributed to revitalizing language use, enhancing learning outcomes, and boosting children's self-esteem. These findings align with international research demonstrating that education in learners' first languages fosters cognitive development, improves literacy outcomes, and supports lifelong learning (Cummins, 2009; World Bank, 2021).

Notably, the implementation of ICE across 14 schools in Lanta created a conducive environment for intercultural understanding, cultivating mutual respect across ethnolinguistic boundaries. This practice aligns with UNESCO's Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion (2020), which advocates for the systemic integration of marginalized languages and intercultural perspectives across formal, informal, and non-formal education. In multicultural contexts such as Lanta, the recognition and acceptance of minority languages by dominant cultural groups play a pivotal role in establishing culturally safe spaces. Such recognition enhances the visibility and legitimacy of vulnerable communities and strengthens their collective identity. The Urak Lawoi experience illustrates how intercultural engagement can promote peaceful coexistence and shared belonging, thereby advancing the principles of equity, justice, and mutual respect central to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (UNESCO, 2021).

Furthermore, revitalization efforts must be situated within the broader framework of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), which upholds the right of indigenous peoples to “revitalize, use, develop, and transmit” their languages across generations (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing educational disparities, particularly for children whose languages were excluded from formal schooling (UNESCO Bangkok, 2021). Rebuilding more equitable education systems in the post-pandemic era requires deliberate policy commitments to integrate indigenous languages and local knowledge through community-based, culturally sustaining MTB-MLE programs. As demonstrated in the Urak Lawoi case, combining community-led action research with institutional support can significantly contribute to language maintenance, social inclusion, and intergenerational learning. Ultimately, such efforts advance global commitments to inclusive, equitable, and quality education while reaffirming the linguistic and cultural rights of indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the transformative role of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and Intercultural Education (ICE) in revitalizing endangered languages and strengthening ethnic identity among marginalized communities. In the case of the Urak Lawoi on Lanta Island, a participatory and community-led approach enabled the development of a Thai-based orthography, culturally relevant learning materials, and teacher training rooted in local knowledge systems. These elements collectively contributed to improved educational engagement, heightened language pride, and intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage.

Beyond linguistic outcomes, the introduction of intercultural education across local schools fostered mutual respect among ethnolinguistic groups, promoting the recognition of diversity as an asset in building a peaceful and equitable society. The Urak Lawoi experience underscores that language revitalization must not occur in isolation but should be supported by inclusive education policies and the active participation of broader communities. When

minority languages and cultural identities are acknowledged, protected, and integrated into the formal education system, sustainable progress toward inclusion, justice, and equity becomes possible. This aligns with Thailand's National Language Policy (Office of the Royal Society, 2018), which highlights the need to preserve and promote local and ethnic languages as part of the country's linguistic and cultural heritage.

The Urak Lawoi case thus offers a practical model of how national policy can be translated into locally grounded, participatory action, contributing not only to SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), but also to the broader goals of cultural rights, social inclusion, and sustainable development.

Authors Contributions

Dr. Mirinda Burarungrot conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, conducted fieldwork, and supervised the overall project. Kumaree Laparporn conducted fieldwork, collected the data, and contributed to the development of the manuscript. Both authors contributed to data analysis, writing, and the final approval of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University (IPSR-IRB), COA No. 2023/08-186.

Informed Consent form

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study prior to their participation.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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