

# Caste Transformation, Intracultural Communication, and Social Structure Dynamics in Kei Society, Southeast Maluku-Indonesia

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the system of social stratification and intracultural communication in the Kei people of Southeast Maluku, Indonesia, which is based on centuries-old caste traditions. Kei society is divided into three main classes: mel-mel (nobles), ren-ren (middle class), and iri-ri (lower class), each of which has roles and rights governed by local customary law, Larwul Ngabal. This caste system has created a recognized social balance despite certain dominance and hegemony. This research uses an ethnographic approach with a focus on direct observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to explore how stereotypes and social stratification are maintained through intracultural communication. The findings show that Kei people use language and cultural symbols to reinforce their caste position, while modernization and electoral politics open space for changes in social dynamics. The results of this study provide insights into how local communities adapt to modernization and democratization while maintaining traditional cultural structures. The implications of this study underscore the importance of understanding the dynamics of intracultural communication in the context of social stratification to maintain social order and promote inclusiveness in the social development of Kei society.*

**Keywords:** *Caste transformation; intra-cultural communication; social structure; kei society.*

## Introduction

In a rapidly changing world, every culture must adapt in order to survive and create social order for its people (Bennet & Bennet, 2004; Boyd et al., 2011; Fullan & Khushal, 2021; Griswold, 2013; Unwin, 2022). These changes and adjustments often involve a dialogue between traditional values and the increasingly complex demands of modern society. This phenomenon occurs not only in urban societies but also in traditional communities, including the Kei people in Southeast Maluku, Indonesia.

The Kei people are known for their caste-based social structure that has lasted for centuries (Fahri & Zainuri, 2020; Salam, 2021). There are three main classes in their social hierarchy: mel-mel (nobles), ren-ren (middle class), and iri-ri (lower class). Each class has roles and rights that are regulated by local customary law, called larwul ngabal. This caste system has created a social balance that is accepted by all parties despite the dominance and hegemony of certain groups. The Kei community still maintains the tradition of caste (social stratification) based on social classes that are divided into three groups. The first group is called mel-mel, which is a group of people with higher positions (nobles, kings, clerics, and masters). The second group is called ren-ren, which is positioned as the middle class, and the third group is called iri-ri which occupies the lowest position in the structure of Kei society. Each group understands its status and role in accordance with the provisions of local customary law called larwul ngabal.

The mel-mel group has rights and privileges that are passed down from generation to generation, such as (1) being the king and being authorized to lead and manage the government, (2) being authorized as religious leaders (priests and pastors), and (3) not being allowed to marry or be married by the two groups below. The ren-ren group is ordinary people (middle class) who cannot be married by the iri-ri group but can marry the mel-mel group with the applicable customary provisions. Meanwhile, the iri-ri group can only marry among themselves. In history, their daily life was to serve their masters (mel-mel), and they were often negatively stereotyped as a low social group with a bad stigma (Sedubun, 2001).

For several centuries, this caste social stratification was accepted as normal despite the hegemony and dominance of the caste (Bêteille, 2023; Buchanan et al., 1993; Gupta, 2000, 2005). Social stratification creates social balance (social equilibrium) (Henrich & Boyd, 2008; Rugina, 1983), in the life of the Kei people because each group accepts the position and position of each other. In the era of the New Order government in Indonesia, the state gave more space to traditional forces that had the influence to control society, so that the ren-ren group, which traditionally had a high position, increasingly dominated

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(Beruatyaa et al., 2021; Kabalmay, 2018; Pribadi, 2022). Meanwhile, the majority iri-ri group does not have the opportunity to increase its social mobility within the Kei community structure.

However, this condition changed when modernization began to enter village communities in the early millennium, and opened up space for participation for people from all walks of life, especially the iri-ri group. This group began to find space for free self-actualization and socio-political mobility along with the implementation of regional autonomy and the strengthening of electoral politics in Indonesia (Pattinasarany, 2016). The dynamics of electoral politics require political elites to embrace as much support as possible from groups that have the majority of votes. The ren-ren group that has been dominating has been forced to negotiate, embrace, and give space to the iri-ri group that has been in its hegemony.

Ease of access to formal education also opens space for people to improve their social status (Ary H. Gunawan, 2000; Cass et al., 2005; S. Jackson and C. Cameron., 2014; Zarghami & Olfat, 2015). Some of the children of the envious class, who had received higher education and were aware of the discriminatory social conditions, began to challenge the dominant social structure. They successfully negotiated their positions and built important careers in the government bureaucracy. Critical voices began to emerge, especially those questioning cultural structures that were considered irrelevant to the development of an increasingly modern society.

This phenomenon is interesting to study from a cultural communication perspective, because the ren-ren group, which has been privileged, is forced by developments to communicate and negotiate so that the traditional cultural structure is maintained. Meanwhile, the majority community, which has been stereotyped, stigmatized, and discriminated against, now finds room for negotiation. Therefore, some important questions that should be asked are: how is the intracultural communication model practiced so that caste can survive in society? What is the impact of these conditions on social dynamics in Kei society? Does modernization encourage certain changes that can be noted in local dynamics? These questions are important to ask because recent developments show that despite the increase in class consciousness, social conditions still remain in social equilibrium.

## Literature Review

### *Social Stratification and Communication in Society*

Caste is a rigid system of social stratification that is passed down from generation to generation (Irshad et al., 2013; Tiwari, 2012). This study aims to examine how community groups create communication spaces to form social order, despite the hegemonic structure of a culturally stratified society. Social stratification refers to the division of society into different levels or classes, mainly influenced by historical origins (Holmwood & Scott, 1997; Jackson, 1968; Lockwood, 1993). The most obvious example of this social stratification is the caste system, which is the main focus of this research.

Social stratification, etymologically derived from the Latin word "stratum" which means layer, is a concept that is often found in various terms such as caste, social class, social status, or social layer. Pitirim A. Sorokin, a prominent sociologist, stated that social stratification is a permanent and universal feature of every society that lives in an orderly manner (Jaworski et al., 1999). This means that this stratification exists in any society with social interaction. Differences in social status directly indicate differences in rights, obligations, social responsibilities, and influence among members of society.

Since people began to recognize forms of living together in social organizations, social layers began to emerge. In simple societies, stratification is based on differences in gender, age, leadership, or wealth. Aristotle stated that in every country there are three classes of people: the very rich, the very poor, and those in the middle (Grusky, 1994). In more complex and advanced societies, stratification systems become increasingly complicated, reflecting larger populations and the increasing complexity of social roles, rights, obligations, and responsibilities.

Social stratification is usually accompanied by stereotyping of the underclass. This phenomenon occurs globally, including in developed countries such as the United States, where it affects black and immigrant groups (Cuddy et al., 2016), as well as in European societies with issues such as antiziganism (Agarin, 2014a, 2014b). Research by Hewstone and Gilles shows that stereotypes stem from the tendency to overestimate group associations (Whitehead, 2019). Stereotypes affect information processing in communication systems, causing a bias towards positive information about one's own group (ingroup) and negative information about other groups (outgroup). Stereotypes shape communication patterns and reinforce existing social stratification (Dovidio et al., 2010; Ruscher, 2001).

Hegemony and domination are key aspects of social stratification that are exercised to maintain existing structures. Dalit communities in India, for example, face ongoing hegemony from Indian elites who exploit their inferiority (M. Hussain & Mahmud, 2019; N. Hussain, 2003). Hegemony is a mechanism of domination through ideology or social norms. In Indonesia, traditional norms function as a tool of domination, especially in traditional societies (Gramsci, 2002). During the Dutch colonial era, certain customs, such as the caste system, were used to reinforce domination over the common people (Blackburn & Gouda, 1999; Manse, 2022; Stoler, 1989). Adopting Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, traditional elites maintain local structures by mastering cultural norms that benefit their position (Buchanan et al., 1993).

The transformation of the caste system in Indonesia cannot be separated from the dynamics of politics and modernization. This change can be seen in the reduction of hierarchical rigidity and increased social mobility. Modernization and education have opened up opportunities for individuals from lower castes to improve their social status (Hefner, 2021). Modernization in Indonesia has brought significant changes in the social structure, including the caste system. Economic development and urbanization have created new opportunities that enable social mobility. For example, industrialization and the development of the service sector have created jobs that are no longer dependent on caste status. Individuals from lower castes now have the opportunity to work in fields that were previously inaccessible. Political changes in Indonesia, especially after the 1998 reforms, have also contributed to the transformation of the caste system. Democratization and decentralization of power have strengthened the role of civil society and opened up space for wider political participation. The Regional Autonomy Law, for example, provides opportunities for local communities to engage in decision-making that affects their lives, including reducing caste-based discrimination.

Some studies situate the caste phenomenon as a practice of domination, focusing on intracultural communication that prevents open conflict despite hegemony (Toyosaki, 2011). Insights into intracultural communication models. In societies with a caste system, intracultural communication serves as a tool to maintain social hierarchy. Language and cultural symbols are used to reinforce caste positions (Geertz, 1980). For example, the use of fine and coarse language in Javanese society reflects a person's social level. Power dynamics, economic factors, and local beliefs are important aspects of this analysis.

This research thus aims to provide insights into how local communities in Indonesia, such as in the Kei Islands, negotiate traditional norms amidst ongoing modernization and democratization. This literature review has outlined key themes and concepts related to social stratification, stereotypes, hegemony, and communication in stratified societies. By examining these elements, this study aims to understand how communication spaces are created to maintain social order, albeit within hegemonically stratified structures, and how local communities adapt to contemporary change.

## Methods

This paper seeks to reveal the existence of social stratification and explain the stereotypes aimed at certain groups, as well as describe the process of cultural communication so that there is room for dialog in ensuring social order. Therefore, the research method used is ethnographic research using a qualitative descriptive approach. The ethnographic research type with a qualitative descriptive approach is used because of its emphasis on micro daily problems in the Kei community structure with the social stratification system of mel-mel, ren-ren, and Iri-ri people in Kei community culture. In addition, the problem of the ongoing process of intracultural communication of the Kei community in addressing the culture owned and the culture gives space to the process of stereotyping between groups and layers of society in Kei society. The subjects of this research are the upper-tier stereotype-giving group in the Key community structure in

Southeast Maluku and the lower-tier group given stereotypes, especially those who experience stereotypical treatment from the lower-tier group in the Kei structure in Southeast Maluku.

This research has been conducted since 2014 and continues to be updated until 2020. During data collection in the field, the author also traveled to several areas in various places in the Kei Islands, involved in various cultural activities, such as life cycle ceremonies (birth, marriage, and death ceremonies), harvest ceremonies, and others. In addition, during this period, the author also attended events in practical political activities. During this period, political events involving the author included meetings on the formation of the Kei Islands, the election of the Mayor-Deputy Mayor of Tual City and Regent-Deputy Regent of Tual Regency, and the 2014 General Election. By immersing themselves in various community activities, the author's position as a researcher is more easily accepted and records more and captures cultural meanings, as well as cultural communication models that take place.

Therefore, in collecting data, three techniques commonly found in qualitative methods are used. First, observation, this technique is used to make direct observations of the process of stereotyping and how the attitudes of people who accept stereotypes, the daily lives of the Kei people, and various events such as political and religious activities. Second, in-depth interviews, which are used to explore information in depth to confirm the data obtained through observations related to social structure and its application in local culture, the ongoing process of intracultural communication of different Kei communities in addressing shared culture. Third, documentation by trying to find other supporting data will be obtained through documentation or other secondary collections related to community behavior in the culture. Data analysis is carried out in three steps, namely data processing, data reduction, presentation in the form of descriptions and explanations/interpretations, and drawing research conclusions.

## Result

### *History of Kei People and Caste Traditions*

The Kei Islands are a group of islands located in the southeastern part of Maluku Province in Eastern Indonesia, with its boundaries to the north bordering southern Papua, to the south bordering the Tanimbar islands, to the east bordering the Aru islands, and to the west bordering the Banda sea (Pattikayhatu, 1998). Other names for the Kei Islands include Kei, Quey, Muar (Moar), and Evav. But in the history of travel, there are only two names that are often used, namely Kei and Nuhu Evav or Evav. Both meanings are used differently, in the national context the name Kei is used, while the name Evav is used in the context of local customs and language (Pattikayhatu, 1998). Southeast Maluku (Kei Islands) consists of 112 islands that can be divided into two large groups, namely the Big Kei Islands (Nuhu Yuut) and the Small Kei Islands (Nuhu Roa), and there are three small groups namely Kur, Tayando, and Tanimbar. Currently, the population of the Kei people is estimated at 100,000 and they still adhere to a custom called Larvul Ngabal.

It is said that in the past there were often wars or fights between community groups. At that time, a nobleman who was famous for having martial arts named Kasdew had a son named Tabtut who came from Bali Island and settled in Ohoivur Woma Rer. Then, Tabtut initiated a law with the aim of regulating order for the people of the Kei Islands under the name Larvul Ngabal customary law. Larvul Ngabal customary law consists of 7 (seven) articles that fully regulate the respect and prohibitions that must be obeyed by the community. Larvul Ngabal customary law is not only the main social glue but also a heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation and is still respected and obeyed by the community.

Just as their ancestors who are believed to have come from Bali Island have social strata based on the Hindu-Bali tradition which is divided into Brahmins, Kstaria, Vaisya, and Sudra, the Kei community also recognizes social stratification which is divided into three categories, namely: Mel-Mel, Ren-Ren, and Iri-ri. The first group called Me-Mel is considered the upper tier of a noble society, either those who come from noble and honorable families, or because they come from groups of people who are famous for their wisdom, beauty, and family (mata rumah) who are honored in the village. There are also Mel-Mel who are acquired by virtue of greatness and courage. Or Mel-mel who are recognized because of their wealth.

The second community group is Ren-ren, which is a group of indigenous people who accept the presence of the Mel group (migrants). Ren is also called Mel vuar lair, the combination of Mel and Ren groups is called Mel ohoi lim. The Ren stratum categories can be divided as follows: Ren Kerbaw Vuar is the Ren nobility in general. Ren Kerbaw Vuar Tel is a noble who inhabits the foot of the mountain. Ren Balu Ur

Lean is a Ren noble who descends from Mel nobles. Ren Bardik is a Ren noble who is independent or free to govern himself. Ren Hungar Naar-Nar Buffalo is a Ren noble who dares to govern himself. Ren Buffalo Memehan is a single Ren noble who lives together with Mel in one ohoi (village). And Ren Buffalo Sir-Inyatak is a Ren noble who lives under Mel-Mel's protection.

The third group is Iri-ri, which is a group of people who come from the Mel and Ren groups and are separated because they violate the noble covenant that has been made together. Generally, groups are divided into several categories.

1. *Iri Raban Duan/Iri Tuan Tom is the Iri-ri group as the host.*
2. *Iri Meduan Tel is the Iri-ri group that serves as the link between the Mel and Ren groups.*
3. *Iri Yat Uran is a group of Iri-ri who have served since their master's ancestors and are cared for by their master as their own children.*
4. *Iri Bardik Markenken is a group of Iri-ri who can be said to be free from servitude but are still loyal to Mel's group.*
5. *Iri Temar Vut-vut is a group of Iri-ri with large surnames, but whose lives are loyal and obedient to their master Mel.*
6. *Iri Tivut Sau is a group of Iri who are saved from punishment and they serve their masters who redeem their souls in a humanitarian manner.*
7. *Tri Tal Taba is the group of Iri who were captured in the war and Vun Inain who must obey their master (Mel's group).*

In the history and tradition of the Kei people, each group knows its position, and the relationship between them is confirmed in various noble agreements that become basic laws and are applied customarily by Mel and Ren. The covenant is marked by the dripping of blood from the bodies of the leaders of Mel and Ren and then drunk together by the two leaders. The oath is divided into 5 articles, namely (Sedubun, 2001):

1. Ren willingly handed over all government and customary affairs, both outward and inward, to Mel.
2. Ren's party is willing to support all affairs and money planning made by Mel's party.
3. Mutual respect and appreciation in daily life.
4. Mutual recognition of the rights and obligations of Mel and Ren.
5. The Mel and Ren parties are not allowed to marry because there has been a thick and intimate brotherhood bond marked by the oath of drinking blood together and stating that the Mel man is related to the Ren woman while the Ren man is related to the Mel woman.

Violation of the noble agreement by both Mel and Ren will be punished by being drowned at sea. The establishment of caste divisions and the implementation of the Lud Luduk law (drowning at sea) in the Kei Islands is an influence of the Luang Maubessy culture.

Dutch colonialism, which ruled for more than three centuries in Indonesia, also played a role in solidifying social stratification in Kei society. Some historians explain that the Dutch used social strata as a means of politicizing and copying society in order to achieve colonial interests. The Dutch took Mel-Mel people from those who were good at administration and had the ability to become leaders in society. Most were "outsiders" who, in their position as the first kings of Kei land, were called hala'ai or leaders. They were people from Bali, Java, Ternate (and Arabia). The Ternate (and Arab) people can be seen in the descendants of the kings on the islands of Dullah Dulahlaut, Tual, Ibra, and some Islamic villages in Kei Besar, while the (Balinese) and Javanese people are mostly Mel-Mel (Ohoitimur, 1983).

The strengthening of this stratum also intensified when there were movements and political upheavals that afflicted and ostracized Kei indigenous people. Government laws rolled out from the center strengthen the strata in Kei society. This condition is also supported by the arrogance of Mel-Mel elements in the executive bureaucracy, legislature, and capital owners, then Mel-Mel was born as the highest strata and has power and privileges in almost all areas of life in Kei society. The Ren-Ren and Iri-ri people are held hostage by historical injustice, the fruit of the Dutch colonizers, and continued by their own brothers, the Kei Mel-Mel people. In Ohoiwait village, for example, the nuhu duan (Ren-natives) do not fulfill their function because they are exploited by the Mel-Mel. Their position is unclear, with some Mel-Mel groups even

claiming that some of these Indigenous people became extinct after the customary authority was handed over (Ngabalin, 2006).

### *Intergroup Stereotyping in Caste Traditions*

It is generally not mentioned publicly that the Iri-ri group is a slave group in the stratification of Kei society. However, there are some villages that were sentenced to slavery as a consequence of not paying taxes during the Dutch colonialism era. During this study, researchers interviewed several informants from the Iri-ri group who rejected the classification as slaves. According to them, the title of a slave is more accurately a label bestowed by some upper-tier groups on the Iri-ri group, generally without classifying the historicization of the two groups.

The stereotype of being a slave itself arose because, during colonialism, the Iri-ri group was usually used as manual labor, laborers, and errand boys. Some even worked voluntarily for their employers without being paid, just to fulfill their needs for food and drink. In the houses of the Mel-mel nobility, the Iri-ri group usually served, who were given housing behind the master's house. They do not receive direct wages, but it is customary law that Mel-mel nobles who are their employers are obliged to fulfill the needs of the Iri-ri families who serve them.

Today, the Iri-ri community strongly rejects the stigma of slaves. The author's conversation with MHD (a young man from the Iri-ri group), who is also a young entrepreneur, rejected the term slave, even saying, "I apologize, it burns my ears if someone says we are slaves." Another informant MGF also gave a statement,

"tell everyone, we are not slaves, if slaves do not have customs and we have customs, then we are also native descendants in Kei. (interview with MGF on September 24, 2014).

Actually, some of the upper-tier groups, also recognize that the Iri-ri group are not really slaves, but they enslave themselves. The sentence relates to their attitude of humiliation, inferiority, and excessive submission to outsiders. However, on the front it says yes, on the back, it does not.

For the Iri-ri group in Kei, the sentence or word slave is now no longer spoken directly in front of the Iri-ri people, but the stigma is implicitly felt by each Iri-ri group, for example, in relation to competition in the election of legislative candidates in Southeast Maluku. Thus, people from the Iri-ri group will find it difficult to get votes from voters from other groups. Imam of a mosque in an Iri-ri settlement. MHD stated that since childhood he had heard the word slave. However, people here in Kei do not generalize it because they always associate them with the lower group. The Iri-ri group admits that in the past the word slave was associated with our parents' profession as manual laborers, unschooled, and poor. All this happened as a result of pressure from the upper group.

Some of the statements above are in line with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's opinion regarding class, race, caste, age, and gender (Spivak, 2000, 2005, 2020). He states that the voices of the oppressed in the subaltern class are fragmented and multi-layered as expressed above. Subaltern voices are dispersed in human subjectivities and historical experiences. In postcolonial studies, human identities and subjectivities change and fragment. Subaltern or oppressed groups are voiceless or "epistemological violence" against subaltern groups.

### *Iri-ri Fools (Ombod or Hir bod)*

Historically, the labeling of the Iri-ri group as ignorant is related to their low level of education over the centuries. This discrimination in education dates back to the colonial era, when education belonged only to the Kei aristocracy and left no room for ordinary people. It seems to be related to the symbolic violence of the Dutch colonials who wanted the underclass to remain ignorant, keep farming, and pay taxes. To this day, there is still a communication gap between the children of the upper tier the children of the Iri-ri group, and the children of their non-Iri-ri neighbors. An informant from Langgur interviewed for this paper, who has lived in the Iri-ri area for decades, said that since playgroup, Iri-ri children do not want to join non-Iri-ri children, even though they are in the same school.

Discriminatory treatment of educational opportunities also occurred during the New Order period in Indonesia, where political oligarchy was very strong in various regions. For example, an informant who

worked as a medical worker (midwife) who studied around 1996. She came from the Iri-ri group and admitted that she was forced to hide her identity as an Iri-ri woman in order to attend high school in Tual City. This case shows the persistence of the historical burden of discriminatory treatment against the educational development of the Iri-ri group. This is relevant to Bourdieu's concept of habitus that the historical stigmatization of themselves is ingrained, internalized, and socialized in the minds of each actor, both individually and collectively (Davey, 2009; Lizardo, 2004) including the Iri-ri group.

According to another informant with the initials LHG, the notion of the Iri-ri being stupid is maintained because they do manual labor and do not require higher education. He said that in the past, the Iri-ri were not allowed to go to school, they were not allowed to build good houses, and if they built good houses, they would be fined (they could not resemble the houses of mel-mel and ren-ren people), and they were not even allowed to perform the hajj pilgrimage, which was said to mean that they would die in the holy land of Mecca.

#### *Iri-Ri Dirty and Smelly Sweat (Human Sian)*

As a result of their low level of education, until the 1980s the Iri-ri group predominantly worked as manual laborers; porters, carpenters, and farmers. This supported the stigma of the Iri-ri group as dirty and smelly. This is despite the fact that this prejudice is also shaped by their diligence in manual labor, which means they rarely bathe from morning to evening, and rarely even return home. One informant stated that "Iri-ri people come home from the garden, usually tired, eat immediately until they get sleepy, and go straight to bed."

This negative stereotype has implications for the Iri-ri group's sense of uncleanness regarding the food they consume. The Mel-mel and Ren-ren groups usually do not want to consume food from the Iri-ri group. For example, at every traditional feast until the early 2000s, neighbors from the Mel-mel and Ren-ren groups never attended any feast. On the other hand, other groups never invited people from the Iri-ri group. Since the reform era, this has changed, with both social groups inviting each other to every traditional event. Nevertheless, among the aristocrats, there is still a sense of compulsion to taste the food provided. One informant from the mel-mel group stated that the food is indeed the same, but it is the way of cooking and hygiene that causes the difference between the food of the upper group and the Iri-ri group. Even the myth of Iri-ri being dirty is institutionalized in anecdotal stories, for example, to crush the head for seasoning, the Mel-mel and ren-ren groups usually use a grater, while the Iri-ri group crushes the coconut by chewing. These stories seem to persist in people's memories. However, the current conditions are different. Dirty cooking procedures are no longer practiced and the Iri-ri group has used cooking utensils like most households in the Kei Islands. In fact, every time a wedding party is held, people from various groups prefer to use food from catering companies in Tual City.

## **Discussion**

### *Caste Practices, and Problems of Hegemony and Domination*

Over the past few years, the caste system in the Kei community has actually melted away, especially in urban areas. Although it is still often used in the context of local customs. That is, the stratification of Mel-Mel, Ren-Ren, and Iri-ri, will be seen when there are traditional ritual events, such as village meetings, the inauguration of Rat (King), Orangkai (Village Head), and other traditional events. In everyday social interactions, there are no contrasting distinctions. However, in certain communities in Kei Besar, the influence of caste as a social layer is still very strongly practiced in the interaction of the people of Southeast Maluku or the Kei people. This can be seen in the tradition of marriage; no cross-strata marriages are allowed between Mel-Mel and Ren-Ren or Mel-Mel and Iri-ri and vice versa.

The position of 'master' of the Mel-Mel people, who controls a number of Ren-Ren and Iri-ri people, is called house people or clan chiefs (Sedubun, 2001). Orang rumah is the name given to the Ren-Ren and especially the Iri-ri, who are the lowest group of people controlled by a Mel-Mel as the head of his family. These people are usually used as laborers for the benefit of their Mel-Mel 'masters'. The Ren-Ren and especially the Iri-ri, who are under his control, are usually used to work in his garden or process copra for his personal economic needs. Because of this arbitrary authority, his living conditions are better than those of the Ren-Ren and Iri-ri, whom he controls. They are also a ready-made labor force for large-scale work in the village.

According to another informant (EDU), the existence of the Mel-Mel, Ren-Ren, and Iri-ri social layering system makes it easier to organize work in the village. Because each Mel-Mel is usually the clan head of the Ren-Ren and Iri-ri groups, when there is work, he simply orders them and the work is easily done. It is bad if the village head or the person with the job is disliked for acting dishonestly and unfairly. In such an atmosphere, they can go on strike and all the work plans that have been initiated are destroyed. There has been defiance from the Ren-Ren people and the Iri-ri people, who avoid being oppressed by certain Mel-Mel individuals.

There is another form of the hegemony of the Mel-Mel people over the Ren-Ren and Iri-ri people. If a Mel-Mel man impregnates a Ren-Ren or Iri-ri girl, the issue is not as exciting and difficult as when a Ren-Ren or Iri-ri man impregnates a Mel-Mel girl. If a Mel-Mel man impregnates a Ren-Ren or Iri-ri girl, all he has to do is pay a fine to the woman's family and that's it; some even leave the matter at that. But if a Ren-Ren or Iri-ri impregnated a Mel-Mel, he would be disowned or expelled from the village and the Mel-Mel woman became a member of the strata from which the man came. She loses her rights and starts living in a new community. If the two really love each other, they usually run away from the village and continue their lives there. They rarely if ever return to the village.

The hegemonic situation as an instrument of power is carried out through the mechanism of domination of norms, including in this case the cultural norms that apply in Kei society (Gramsci, 2002). Another area of dominance of the Mel-Mel people to this day is through the government bureaucracy, which holds many important positions in Tual City and Southeast Maluku Regency. Ren-Ren people and it is very difficult for Iri-ri to occupy these positions. For example, the bureaucrats in the Southeast Maluku Regent's office and also in the Tual Mayor's office, all the Heads of Service are Mel-Mel people. No one is Ren-Ren, let alone Iri-ri. Only during the reign of the Regent of Southeast Maluku 2009-2014, was there an Acting Head of Service who was Ren-Ren. Even though he is still in office and has not yet become a permanent official, the color of change seems to have begun to be displayed from the absolute dominance of Mel-Mel, and began to open up to Ren-Ren.

The following is a map of the distribution of hegemonic practices or more accurately, discrimination based on caste (Sedubun, 2001).

**Table. 1** Distribution of strata discrimination attitudes within villages.

No	Discrimination	Village Location	Description
1	Extreme	Weduar, OhoiRenan, Ohoiel, Ohoiwait,	South Kei Besar
		Mun Warfan, Ad	North Kei Besar
		Yamtel, Ohoingan	Around Elat
		Ela'ar Lamagorong	East Kei Kecil
2	Tolerant	Weduar, OhoiRenan, Ohoiel, Ohoiwait,	South Kei Besar
		Mun Warfan, Ad	North Kei Besar
		Yamtel, Fako,	Around Elat
		Ela'ar Lamagorong	East Kei Kecil
3	Anti	Ngurdu, Waurtahait	Around Elat

Source: Sedubun, 2014.

The practice of hegemony also occurs in religious life and penetrates the walls of mosques and churches. Observations of social strata in the mosque took place in a mosque in Kei Besar where it was found that the attendance and participation of members of the congregation to worship were the same, both Mel-Mel, Ren-Ren, and Iri-ri people. The striking thing is that Ren-Ren and Iri-ri people are reluctant to sit in the shop or on the seats in the front row. Usually, it is the Mel-Mel people who enter and sit in the front row. They are heads of government departments, members and leaders of the House of Representatives, or members of the congregation who are not Kei people.

As for the worship leader, if you are Kei, he must be a Mel-Mel. It is very difficult to accept if the imam of the mosque is Ren-Ren or Iri-ri. An informant named YR, who is also a student at a university in Ambon, said that during Friday prayers or congregational prayers, usually, those who occupy the front row are Mel-Mel people and Mel-Mel government officials. The middle and lower-class people usually take their places at the very back. According to the informant's explanation, when the Ren-Ren and Iri-ri people come to pray, they seem to provide an empty place in the center of the mosque so that later if there are Mel-Mel people who come to pray, there is still room. Apparently, the act of deliberately providing an empty place



in the center for Mel-Mel people who are late for prayer has a purpose. In fact, by doing so, they, the Ren-Ren and Iri-ri people, want to provide a conflict-free zone between the social strata boundaries of Mel-Mel and Ren-Ren and Mel-Mel and Iri-ri, so that conflicts do not occur. I see this conflict over social boundaries, which reinforces Mel-Mel's separation and oppression of Ren-Ren and Iri-ri. The social boundary has been enforced in almost every aspect of life, in the office, in the marketplace, and even in the mosque.

The description above shows that social strata or social layers are the toughest problems for the development and progress of the Kei people, in Southeast Maluku. This social system is well maintained by the Mel-Mel people in the elite of society, especially the bureaucracy in the government of Southeast Maluku Regency. It also applies to Kei people who are outside the region. The stratification structure of society based on adat creates a kind of group domination, especially the Mel-mel group over the Iri-ri who get various negative labels as slaves, stupid, and dirty. This domination was realized over centuries but accepted as an established structure. In this context, domination is understood as control by certain stronger parties over others who are weaker. Thus, the practice of caste domination in the political arena can be defined as a form of battle that occurs between actors from different ethnic bases to compete for political resources, where the results of the battle will appear certain caste (ethnic) actors (groups) as stronger winners and have control over political economic resources against other caste actors (groups) who lose and are in a weaker position.

The recognition of the actor's authority is due to the actor's undoubted symbolic and cultural capital. The symbolic capital is owned by actors, such as descendants of aristocrats (upper class from traditional social layers), heads of ethnic groups, heads of community organizations, and lecturers/teachers. Meanwhile, cultural capital is owned by actors, such as higher education degrees, commitment to education, and extensive knowledge of ethnic history and culture. Starting from these two capitals, the actors seem to have authority and are oriented towards upholding the principle of autonomous hierarchy, namely maintaining the existence of their ethnicity in the local political arena.

When Bourdieu's opinion above is adjusted to the context of this study, the modus operandi is the condition and position of caste groups that are influenced by the historical dimension (objectification) which has a strong structure and has been built for a long time. In other words, caste history is a mode of practice that caste groups maintain massively to perpetuate the dominant discourse of symbolic power. Then this mode of practice has an impact on the strengthening of legitimacy and power that affects the formation of caste identity in the local political arena. Therefore, the identity of actors in plural societies is a habitus obtained from the history of ethnicity. Meanwhile, the opus operatum is the experience (subjectification) of the actor when interpreting the reality faced in the local political arena, thus forming a caste identity or habitus which is the selfhood of the actor. The objectification and subjectification as intended will be described below.

#### *Intracultural Communication and Social Order in Kei Society*

For centuries, until the era of modern Key societies, the tradition of caste has established hegemony and domination, especially from the Mel-mel Caste to the Iri-ri. This was accompanied by a number of stereotypes such as stupid, dirty, rude, and so on. However, what is interesting is that during this period, there was no open conflict between caste groups, including the Iri-ri group, which was in the majority. The Key community was still able to create a social order and a social life that understood each other's position.

In the context of intercultural communication, there is an important question as to why caste is accepted as normal and creates social order in the local community. This is certainly related to the success of community elites (traditional and religious leaders) in justifying the caste tradition as part of the norms of living together. Effective intracultural communication creates a kind of interdependence between each group in Key's society so that they are willing to live with differences. Moreover, the socialization of (societal) values as part of the communication function, becomes a source of knowledge and local wisdom that allows each Key person to behave and act as an effective member of society so that he is aware of his social function and can be active in society. In this case, there are several things that can be noted as a model of intracultural communication that is created.

### *The Sacredness of Caste Culture*

Caste status, which is actually hegemonic and dominative, has been accepted as the norm for centuries. It is neutralized through various traditions, rituals, and cultural ceremonies in Key, such as in birth ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, death ceremonies, religious ceremonies, and formal activities at the community level. These traditional ceremonies create a symbol of sacredness among the community, as they link the caste tradition to something transcendental, a creation of the ancestors that have certain consequences (bala) for those who violate it. The sacred caste is related to things that are full of mystery, both marvelous for those who carry it out and frightening for those who violate it.



**Figure 1.** Preparation Ritual for the Ancestral Tomb Pilgrimage .

**Source:** (Led by Melmel group and followed by Iri-ri).

Over a long period of time, the sacred caste structure could not be approached or understood rationally. It became part of local beliefs which, according to Bustanuddin Agus, are similar to the sacredness that is the basic idea of religion (Agus, 2006). This scarcity gave birth to resignation, an attitude of accepting what is the various domination that occurs through the caste system. Alo Liliweri calls this condition something natural because every element in society tries to maintain and maintain social order (Liliweri, 2001), or defend themselves from other groups that could attack. There is a kind of realistic attitude that grows, that caste is a place to defend the community from various threats that block their development. It is only natural that every cultural group, both fellow castes and different castes always create intracultural relationships and communication that "require" each generation to understand each other's conditions, and socialize values, and good cultural behaviors through a variety of sacred rituals.

Weber explains that sees religion and various local beliefs performing very different functions for various social strata (Weber, 2018). For privileged social strata, it serves as a tool to legitimize or justify their powerful and privileged social position. On the other hand, for strata that do not have privileges, religion is especially important as a means of compensation in another life for failure and inadequacy in this life. This is in line with Robertson Smith's view of ceremonial offerings that religious ceremonies or religions carried out by many community members have a social function to intensify community solidarity (Yoffee & Beidelman, 1978).

### *Inter-group Economic Dependence*

The second interesting thing in this intracultural communication is the dependence on the Kei community itself, especially in economic relations between caste groups, so that mutual understanding of each other's positions is created. For example, the Iri-ri group works for their masters as servants, maids, garden laborers, and other manual labor. In the tradition of the Kei community, the Iri-ri group who live with Mel-mel's employer are referred to as house people. Structurally, they are the object of oppressive practices, especially in villages where caste is still strong. Most house people do not earn a salary, but they are provided for by Mel-mel's employer.

So the behavior of the Iri-ri group with their loyal attitude of submission to their Mel-mel masters, turns out to be related to a practice of symbiotic mutualism that creates a feeling of mutual benefit because even though there is domination, there is a guarantee (social insurance) that Iri-ri who serve as house people will not be left behind by their Mel-mel employers. Another example of this economic relationship is the management of land, which is limited in the community. As an island society, it maintains a caste-based structure, with the mel-mel and ren-ren classes as the economic and political rulers who are customarily the political leaders and landlords, and the iri-ri as the servant class. The ruling class controls one-third of the land in the traditional territory of the Kei islands. So the Iri-ri group is forced by circumstances to show loyalty in order to continue to be trusted to manage the available land. That is why the Iri-ri group, which is under the Mel-mel and Ren-ren landlord groups, tends to get benefits if they continue to cooperate. Iri-ri group farmers are in a relationship of economic dependence or subordination to landowners. This condition makes them always in economic dependence with the mel-mel group.

### *Negotiation and Consequences of Structural Change*

The development of contemporary Indonesia, marked by the reform of the political system and democratization that has occurred since the beginning of 2000, has also influenced changes in the perspective of people in various regions including the Kei people who have a strict Caste structure. The king, as a representation of the customary ruler in Kei, still runs the wheels of government based on the rules of government bureaucracy and larwul ngabal customary values adopted by the community. The king is still not elected, but inherited through the hereditary system so that the inheritance of traditional power in the villages remains in the hands of Mel-mel. However, democratization at the local level which requires an electoral model demands majority support for the political power of the ruling government in Kei society. So that there is open negotiation and contestation between community elites to compete for seats, both in the Southeast Maluku Regency government bureaucracy, as well as the seats of political representatives in the local legislature.

The political mobility of leaders through local elections requires the votes of many people, which is very beneficial for the Iri-ri group. They now have the momentum to change cultural structures, especially in government and politics, with their electoral power. Some of them managed to occupy important positions in the government bureaucracy. The dominance and hegemony of the upper-tier groups over the years and the people's passive resentment of local elites opened up space for contestation in politics.

So the election of the Southeast Maluku Regent and Tual Mayor opened up space for the Iri-ri people to make a breakthrough to break out of the hegemony of superiority, both traditional and modern elites. Economic capital as a result of the sale of land plots led to their success in improving education, and politics, becoming soldiers, nurses, and legislators. Some youth elites who have tasted higher education try to change the identity of the iri-ri group in the midst of the predicate pinned by the elite on themselves as a backward society. This is relevant to Marx's analysis developed by Gramsci that the rise of the middle class, accompanied by various kinds of capitalist reforms, seems to benefit the working class. In addition, the strong influence of Catholicism in everyday life meant that violent revolution did not appeal to the masses (Sullivan, 1969; Taylor, 1996; Yoffee & Beidelman, 1978). At that time, the Iri-ri group began to rise economically, educationally, and politically, which had been hiding behind the injustices played by the traditional elites, who controlled the political scene in Southeast Maluku and Tual City. The ignorant title given to the Iri-ri group by some traditional elites is now gradually being dismissed by the educated, as shown by several Iri-ri actors who have entered political parties. The legislative candidates of the Iri-ri group in 2019 numbered more than 19 people and all of them had kinship relations. The party space they entered became one of the tools to fight traditional social stratification in Southeast Maluku.

In addition to the legislative arena, the Iri-ri group who have become civil servants (PNS) have also received accommodation space in the local bureaucracy. Even since the implementation of regional autonomy in Kei, there have been 20 people from the Iri-ri group who have occupied important positions as heads of government offices in the Tenggara Maluku Regency, especially since 2012-2021. The success of the Iri-ri group in occupying government and political positions is interpreted as status mobility, although there are still expressions of dissatisfaction for the upper-tier groups who still always embed "customary positions" in everyday life. But for the Iri-ri group, this is considered a motivation to further improve their standard of living or improve their status through education and government.

## Conclusion

This research reveals that the caste system that exists in the Kei people of Southeast Maluku, Indonesia, plays an important role in maintaining their social structure. Kei society is divided into three main groups: mel-mel (nobles), ren-ren (middle class), and iri-ri (lower class), each of which has roles and rights governed by local customary law, Larwul Ngabal. Although this caste system has existed for centuries, modernization and democratization politics have affected social dynamics in Kei society.

This research found that intra-community communication plays a key role in maintaining stereotypes and social stratification among the Kei people. Language and cultural symbols are used to reinforce their caste position, while modernization brings changes in social dynamics, providing space for transformation in their traditional structure.

The conclusion of this study shows the importance of understanding intra-community communication dynamics in the context of social stratification to promote inclusivity and maintain traditional cultural structures. This study provides insights into how local communities adapt to the changes of modernization while still maintaining their cultural structures, showing that social evolution does not necessarily replace tradition but can bring innovation in a way that maintains distinctive cultural values.

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