Language, Power, and Identity:
A Sociolinguistic Study of The Alas Language

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	Abstract
	This study investigates Mekhadat, a ritual speech performed in Alas wedding ceremonies, from a sociolinguistic perspective focusing on language, power, and identity. Using qualitative methods, including participant observation and interviews with community elders, the study explores how Mekhadat embodies ecological metaphors, symbolic authority, and cultural identity. The findings reveal that natural and agricultural imagery, such as rice and water, is central to the discourse, reflecting the Alas community's ecological worldview and their emphasis on fertility, harmony, and prosperity. The study also highlights the power dimension, where only elders or traditional leaders are authorized to deliver Mekhadat, thus legitimizing authority through language in line with Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power. Furthermore, Mekhadat functions as a cultural marker, strengthening collective identity and transmitting values across generations. These findings suggest that Mekhadat is not simply a ritual performance but also a place where ecological wisdom, social hierarchy, and cultural identity converge. This study contributes to broader discussions in sociolinguistics by demonstrating how ritual discourse in minority languages functions as a medium for cultural continuity and symbolic negotiation**.**
	Abstrak Studi ini menyelidiki Mekhadat , sebuah pidato ritual yang dilakukan dalam upacara pernikahan Alas , dari perspektif sosiolinguistik yang berfokus pada bahasa, kekuasaan, dan identitas. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, termasuk observasi partisipan dan wawancara dengan tetua masyarakat, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana Mekhadat mewujudkan metafora ekologis, otoritas simbolis, dan identitas budaya. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa citraan alam dan pertanian, seperti beras dan air, merupakan pusat wacana, yang

mencerminkan pandangan dunia ekologis masyarakat Alas dan penekanan mereka pada kesuburan, harmoni, dan kemakmuran. Studi ini juga menyoroti dimensi kekuasaan, di mana hanya tetua atau pemimpin tradisional yang berwenang untuk menyampaikan Mekhadat, sehingga melegitimasi otoritas melalui bahasa yang sejalan dengan gagasan Bourdieu tentang kekuatan simbolis. Lebih jauh, Mekhadat berfungsi sebagai penanda budaya, memperkuat identitas kolektif dan mentransmisikan nilai-nilai lintas generasi. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa mekhadat bukan sekadar pertunjukan ritual tetapi juga tempat di mana kebijaksanaan ekologis, hierarki sosial, dan identitas budaya bertemu. Studi ini berkontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas dalam sosiolinguistik dengan menunjukkan bagaimana wacana ritual dalam bahasa minoritas berfungsi sebagai media kesinambungan budaya dan negosiasi simbolik

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role not only as a medium of communication but also as a symbolic tool through which power, identity, and cultural values are negotiated. In sociolinguistic studies, ritualized forms of speech are often analyzed as sites where cultural traditions and social hierarchies are reproduced. (Faircloght, 2013). One form of speech realized in the Alas community in Southeast Aceh, Indonesia, is Mekhadat—a traditional speech performed during wedding ceremonies. (Sundana, 2024).

Sociolinguistic theory emphasizes that language is not a neutral phenomenon; it is an arena in which power and identity are formed and reproduced. Pierre (Bourdieu, 1991) He states that language is symbolic capital—a form of capital that grants access to particular registers or genres of speech, which in turn reflect and reinforce hierarchies of power. In ritual discourse, the authority to speak is not distributed evenly; instead, it is tied to social status, age, or customary role (Duranti, 1997).

The Mekhadat is more than just a cultural decoration; it serves as a linguistic act that legitimizes the social ties between two families, strengthens customary authority, and symbolizes collective identity (Wiabda et al., 2025). Delivered by

respected elders or traditional leaders, Mekhadat is characterized by the use of metaphor, symbolism, and formulaic expressions. The performance emphasizes the hierarchical relationships within Alas society, where authority in language is closely tied to age, gender, and traditional position.

The Alas community in Southeast Aceh, Indonesia, is one of the ethnic groups with a rich oral tradition. However, like many minority communities in Indonesia, its language and cultural practices face threats from modernization and language shift. Indonesian, as the national language, dominates public and formal spaces, leaving younger generations of Alas increasingly less proficient in ritual speeches such as Mekhadat (Lestari, 2023). This phenomenon creates an intergenerational gap and the risk of erosion of cultural values embedded in these ritual performances. (Indarti & Fidyati, 2023).

The study of Mekhadat focuses not only on linguistic description but also on cultural practices that encode relations of power and identity. By locating it within the broader literature on ritual discourse and sociolinguistics, this research contributes to filling an existing research gap, namely the documentation and revitalization of endangered oratory traditions. The results are expected to provide new insights into how ritual discourse in minority languages such as Alas functions as a medium for cultural continuity and symbolic negotiation. Practically, this research also highlights the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage as part of efforts to maintain cultural pluralism in Indonesia.

Research on language, power, and identity has long emphasized the role of discourse in shaping social relations and cultural continuity. Scholars such as (Bourdieu, 1991) argues that language is a form of symbolic capital, where access to particular varieties or speech genres reflects and reinforces hierarchies of power. In ritual discourse, the authority to speak is not distributed evenly, but is tied to social status, age, or customary role (Duranti, 1997).

Sociolinguistic studies also highlight the performative nature of ritual speech. (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) noted that ritual speech is characterized by formalization, repetition, and the use of marked registers, distinguishing it from everyday language. These characteristics are observed across cultures, from Native American

ceremonial speech to the Malay pantun tradition, demonstrating that ritual discourse functions as a medium for identity construction and cultural reproduction.

In the Indonesian context, several studies have examined the role of traditional speech in expressing cultural identity and negotiating social relations. For example, (Cempaka Mz et al., 2021) analyzed Umpasa (ritual speech) of the Toba Batak and found that metaphors and parallel structures play a key role in maintaining kinship ties. Similarly, (Indarti & Manara, 2025) discusses the challenges faced by Acehnese ritual speech traditions in the face of language shift, emphasizing the importance of revitalization. These studies provide a comparative framework for understanding Mekhadat within broader Indonesian ritual practices.

Specific studies of the Alas community are still limited. Ethnographic works (Hasbullah et al., 2022) briefly mentions mekhadat as part of a wedding ceremony, but does not offer a detailed sociolinguistic analysis. This gap highlights the urgency of documenting mekhadat, not only as a linguistic form, but also as a cultural practice that encodes power relations and identities. By situating mekhadat within the broader literature on ritual discourse and sociolinguistics, this study contributes to filling this existing research gap.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative sociolinguistic approach with an ethnographic orientation (Sugiyono, 2023), This study aimed to explore the linguistic characteristics and cultural functions of Mekhadat in Alas traditional wedding ceremonies. This research was conducted in Kutacane, Southeast Aceh, considered the cultural center of the Alas community. Data were obtained through naturalistic observations of three traditional wedding ceremonies, semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, including traditional leaders, elders, and younger generations, and analysis of related manuscripts and recordings.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the involvement of individuals with in-depth knowledge of ritual discourse and those positioned as cultural inheritors. During the observations, field notes and audio recordings were taken with the participants' consent to capture the structure and

implementation of Mekhadat. Interviews were designed to uncover the meaning, symbolism, and social roles embedded in the discourse.

All recorded data was transcribed, translated into Indonesian and English, and analyzed thematically. This analysis follows Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, which examines the text at three levels: the micro-level of textual features such as metaphors and lexical choices, the meso-level of discursive practices including performance contexts and speaker roles, and the macro-level of social practices highlighting how Mekhadat reflects power relations and identity construction. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, with informed consent obtained from all participants, confidentiality maintained, and cultural sensitivities respected in recognizing the sacred nature of ritual practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The Alas tribe has many unique cultural traditions, the authenticity of which is still maintained to this day. This has led the Alas community to develop a shared vision that can enhance trust and protect their dignity, deeply rooted in tradition. Violations of custom within the Alas community are strictly prohibited. However, if violations do occur, they can be resolved completely and satisfactorily by the indigenous community outside of court. This is where the psychological importance of implementing customs for the Alas community lies, which will determine the future of this region. "Customary law in the Alas community has proven to play a significant role in regulating the order of community life for hundreds of years. Thus, the terms customary law, sanctions, and fines are known." (Southeast Aceh Regency, 2003:1).

Mekhadat is more than just a series of words; it is a multi-dimensional performance that combines verbal art, symbolism, and social practices. When a traditional elder utters phrases filled with agricultural metaphors or natural imagery, he is not simply delivering a wedding greeting; he is also reinforcing social hierarchies, confirming the legitimacy of leadership, and strengthening bonds between families (Wiabda et al., 2025). In a global context where minority

languages like Alas face the threat of language shifting, Mekhadat becomes a symbol of resistance, proving that culture can survive through a vibrant language.

This research arose from a desire to understand how Mekhadat plays a role in navigating three crucial pillars: language as a communication system, power as a social structure, and identity as a collective heritage. By examining ritual discourse, metaphorical expressions, and the context in which they are performed, the findings of this study demonstrate that Mekhadat in Alas traditional weddings is not only a medium of communication but also a symbolic practice that conveys values of well-being, unity, and cultural identity.

One of its distinctive characteristics is the use of metaphors based on agriculture and nature. For example:

Alas text: *"Kami metue rempah ni umah , ngenuli padi ni bere , ngidupken bage ni dunia."*

Translation: "We bring home spices, grow rice of blessings, give life to the world."

This expression conceptualizes marriage as cultivation. The metaphor "padi ni bere" (blessed rice) symbolizes prosperity and fertility, while "ngidupken bage ni dunia" (giving life to the world) expresses the hope that marriage will sustain not only the family but also the wider community. In line with (Johnson's, 2003) conceptual metaphor theory, this reflects the cultural model of Marriage as Cultivation, in which human relationships are understood within the context of agricultural practices.

Metaphors related to nature are also prevalent, particularly images of water. For example:

Alas text: *"Umpama aye ni lau , teruh metungah , lang perna kekeringen."*

Translation: "Like river water, which always flows, which never dries up."

This saying symbolizes continuity, abundance, and the eternal flow of love. Water (*aye)* In Alas cosmology, the word "mekhadat" carries sacred connotations, making it a powerful metaphor for blessing a married life. Its use demonstrates how ecological values are embedded in ritual language, reflecting the interconnectedness of humans and nature in Alas culture.

This finding also highlights the dimension of power within Mekhadat. The authority to deliver speeches rests solely with elders or traditional leaders, whose legitimacy is socially recognized. This is illustrated in the following example:

Alas teks: *"Kami ni wakil jema tuan rumah , nyampaikan hajat si ikhlas , sihurus kamu diterime ."*

Translation: "We, as representatives of the host family, sincerely convey this intention, which should be accepted."

The use of the collective pronoun "we" emphasizes that the speaker is not representing an individual, but rather the entire kinship group. This reflects the idea (Bourdieu, 1991) The concept of symbolic power, where authority in speech is rooted in social recognition and cultural tradition, is based on the belief that elders demonstrate linguistic and social authority.

Alas community wedding customs begin with a proposal of marriage, which occurs after the prospective bride and groom have agreed to proceed with the marriage. The groom's family, after obtaining the bride's consent, continues the proposal process by requesting permission to pay a dowry. This proposal is important because it serves to ensure that both prospective brides and grooms agree and are ready to move forward with marriage. Before determining the dowry, the groom's family offers Rp. 25,000 (approximately US$0.20) in betel nut money as a sign of goodwill to continue the customary process. This money symbolizes their sincerity in initiating the proposal. In this case, the groom's family proposes by visiting the bride's family, either with their knowledge or without their knowledge, but it is expected. (Interview with Prasto Saptadi, January 26, 2024, 15.30 WIB, Southeast Aceh Regency, 2003:7).

The traditional wedding process begins with the first step, called lumbe (announcement). During this stage, the prospective groom's family visits the prospective bride's family to explore their family life and check whether the bride is already married. This visit is conducted by several members of the groom's side, who are usually married, bringing food and betel nut-burning utensils as a conversation starter. If the reception from the bride's family is positive, the next stage is kutuk (interview with M. Alidin Pinem, January 30, 2024, 10:00 a.m. WIB).

Kutuk is the next stage after lumbe. The groom's side sends several adults to convey the proposal. They bring items such as kampil (a traditional offering) and pangpinang manulung (a traditional offering) containing betel nut, areca nut, tobacco, and other ingredients. The purpose of kutuk is to express the intention to propose to the bride, through a predetermined intermediary called telangke. This Telangke will act as a liaison between the two families during this stage (interview with M. Alidin Pinem, January 30, 2024, 10:00 a.m. WIB).

After the curse, the process continues to the khisik or risik stage, where the male representatives return to continue the discussion. They bring food and other supplies as a sign of their seriousness in proposing. During this stage, the man will only listen to the decision of the woman, represented by the telangke. The discussion at this stage focuses on whether to approve or reject the proposal, which will be decided in a deliberation among the woman's family (interview with M. Alidin Pinem, January 30, 2024, 10:00 a.m. WIB).

Pepekhi is the consensus stage that occurs after the khisik or risik is accepted by the woman. If the woman's family agrees to the proposal, this stage signifies the official acceptance of the proposal. During this stage, the man's entourage brings traditional items such as betel nut and food to be given to the woman's family. If the proposal is rejected, the woman will not receive compensation for what was given during the traditional process (interview with Zulfikar, January 30, 2024, 10:30 a.m. WIB).

After the pepekhi, the proposal process continues with the more formal betel nut cutting (pinang cutting). This time, the groom's entourage is larger and consists of traditional leaders and community members. They bring various foods, traditional sacks, and other equipment, and explain the purpose of the proposal to the bride. Here, the groom informs the bride of the amount to be paid, followed by a communal meal as a sign of agreement. Afterward, the group bids farewell and heads home (interview with Zulfikar, February 1, 2024, 10:30 a.m. WIB)..

Pinang cut The purpose of the ceremony is to convey a serious intention to marry. The group of men, consisting of traditional leaders, brings food supplies and betel and areca nuts and recite traditional words of wisdom to announce the

payment. Following this declaration, a communal meal is part of the tradition of taking the relationship to a more formal level. This event signifies the acceptance of the proposal and the move to the next step.

The mbelin (formalization of the proposal) stage is where the proposal is considered valid according to customary law and Islamic teachings. At this stage, the groom is required to pay a traditional betel nut (pinang) fee of Rp. 160,000. This payment is distributed to the village head, residents, and married community members. This customary fee symbolizes the imminent marriage and that the proposed woman is not permitted to accept proposals from anyone else. If a marriage is canceled, the canceling party must pay a higher amount of shame money (interview with Amiruddin Selian, January 29, 2024, 11:10 a.m. WIB).

Apart from the betel nut money, during the mbelin stage, the group from the groom's side brings various items as souvenirs, which are more numerous than at the stage *pinang cut*. The gifts included traditional foods, betel nuts, and other traditional items. This demonstrates the groom's seriousness in the marriage and the mutual agreement reached between the two families (interview with Amiruddin Selian, January 29, 2024, 11:10 a.m. WIB).

Midoi is the final stage in wedding preparations, where both parties agree on a wedding date and prepare everything. During this stage, the items brought are similar to betel nuts, with the addition of a single-eyed coconut as a symbol of the marriage vows. The decision regarding the wedding date becomes the main focus of this discussion, signaling that the wedding ceremony will soon take place (interview with Amiruddin Selian, January 29, 2024, 11:10 a.m. WIB).

Overall, Alas tribal wedding customs involve a series of stages starting from the lumbe to *midoi*, Each stage has its own meaning and symbolism. Each of these traditional processes demonstrates the importance of the consent of both families and the customary agreements that must be respected. This lengthy process illustrates the seriousness of the Alas people in carrying out marriage and maintaining harmonious relationships between the families.

Discussion

Mekhadat as a Communication Tool in Traditional Wedding Ceremonies of the Alas Tribe. Mekhadat is the core of ritual communication in the marriage customs of the Alas Tribe in Southeast Aceh. (Ari, 2021). More than just a series of words, the Mekhadat serves as a means of communication that unites two families through customary deliberation. During this process, both parties agree on a dowry, customary money, and other requirements before proceeding to the wedding. The Mekhadat is usually held in the evening, around 8:00 PM WIB, after Isha prayers, at the bride's home. The event is attended by community leaders, traditional leaders, village government officials, as well as families from both sides of the bride and groom's family and friends. The goal is to reach an agreement so that there will be no misunderstandings between the two families during the wedding ceremony.

During the Mekhadat, several matters are discussed, namely: (1) gaji malu (dowry or ndape) and the bride's request (wapit), (2) uang Mekhadat (money for the Mekhadat ceremony), and (3) pinang mupakat (customary requirements that must be met by the groom for the bride). This deliberation process is conducted openly and transparently, with the goal of reaching a fair agreement for both parties. If both parties agree, the agreement is considered valid. However, if the agreement is not agreed upon by both parties, the Mekhadat implementation is postponed until a mutual agreement is reached.

The Mekhadat also serves as a means to strengthen ties between families and the community. Through this deliberation process, both parties can get to know each other better, understand each other's hopes and needs, and build trust. This is crucial for creating a harmonious and lasting relationship in marriage. Furthermore, the Mekhadat also serves as a forum for reaffirming the traditional and cultural values of the Alas Tribe that have been passed down through generations. Thus, the Mekhadat serves not only as a means of communication within the context of marriage but also as a medium for preserving local traditions and culture.

In communication studies, Mekhadat can be analyzed as a form of ritual communication that has a certain structure and pattern. According (Deva et al.,

2021), ritual communication in Alas culture, such as Mekhadat, serves the functions of socialization, education, and preservation of socio-cultural heritage. Through this ritual communication, social values and norms are transmitted to the younger generation, enabling them to understand and appreciate their traditions and culture. Furthermore, ritual communication also plays a role in strengthening cultural and community identity and building social cohesion among community members.

The importance of Mekhadat in Alas Tribe wedding customs is also reflected in the community's efforts to maintain and preserve this tradition amidst modernization and globalization. Although it has undergone several changes over time, Mekhadat remains a vital part of the Alas Tribe's traditions and cultural identity. This demonstrates that Mekhadat is not merely a traditional ritual, but also an integral part of the communication system and social structure of the Alas Tribe.

Thus, Mekhadat can be understood as a communication tool with profound meaning and function in Alas Tribe wedding customs. Through Mekhadat, communication occurs not only between individuals but also between families and communities, with the goal of reaching agreements, strengthening social ties, and preserving local traditions and culture. Therefore, Mekhadat plays a crucial role in maintaining the sustainability and harmony of the Alas Tribe community.

CONCLUSION

Mekhadat is a ritual discourse containing agricultural and natural metaphors, such as rice and water, which symbolize fertility, prosperity, and the continuation of marriage. This reflects the ecological worldview of the Alas people, who place nature as the primary source of meaning. Furthermore, only elders or traditional leaders are authorized to convey Mekhadat, demonstrating symbolic power and linguistic authority, in line with Bourdieu's notion of the power of language. Language also functions as a tool of social legitimacy and solidarity, as well as a marker of cultural identity that distinguishes the Alas people in the multicultural context of Aceh. Mekhadat plays a crucial role in transmitting values and traditions, serving as a medium for intergenerational cultural continuity in the Alas community.

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