

Intercultural Communication Patterns in Bugis–Lauje Marriages: Negotiating Identity and Harmony in Rural Central Sulawesi, Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to analyze the intercultural communication patterns between Bugis–Lauje couples in Tinombo, Central Sulawesi. The research aims to understand how these couples navigate linguistic, emotional, and cultural differences in their daily lives, and how traditional rituals and family mediators serve as bridges of meaning to maintain marital harmony. **Methodology:** The research employs a qualitative case study approach with six purposively selected informants, including two interethnic couples, two family members, and two traditional leaders. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model with triangulation and member checking to ensure validity. **Findings:** The findings show that Bugis–Lauje couples achieve intercultural harmony through continuous negotiation and adaptation. Indonesian functions as a neutral lingua franca in household communication, while Bugis and Lauje languages are used in rituals to maintain cultural identity. Couples adopt adaptive strategies such as humor, patience, code-switching, and family mediation to transform potential misunderstandings into mutual understanding. Rituals like *mappacci* (Bugis) and *modutu* (Lauje) serve as symbolic spaces of cultural dialogue, reinforcing kinship ties and social cohesion. **Implications:** The study makes significant contributions both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it extends Kim’s Stress–Adaptation–Growth model, Giles’s Communication Accommodation Theory, and Ting-Toomey’s Face-Negotiation Theory within the Indonesian intercultural context. Practically, it proposes policy recommendations such as pre-marital intercultural communication modules at KUA, handbooks for family mediators, and bilingual ritual literacy programs to enhance cross-ethnic understanding in rural communities. **Originality and Value:** This research makes a novel contribution by focusing on the domestic sphere of intercultural communication in rural Central Sulawesi—an area that has been rarely examined in prior studies. It introduces the concept of a hybrid communication model that merges linguistic, cultural, and emotional elements, illustrating how multiethnic families act as agents of social cohesion in Indonesia’s multicultural landscape.

Keywords: Adaptation strategy; Bugis–Lauje marriage; Central Sulawesi; family mediation; intercultural communication.

Introduction

The daily life of the community in Tinombo District, located on the coast of Parigi Moutong Regency, is marked by ethnic diversity living side by side. The Bugis people, who arrived as migrants, brought their traditions, language, and customs heavily influenced by the values of *siri’ na pacce* (honor and pride), hierarchy, and highly

complex wedding rituals. Meanwhile, in research (Irpan, Malabar, & Masie, 2023). The Lauje community, as the indigenous inhabitants, presents a culture that is egalitarian, open, and simple in their social interactions. The meeting of these two ethnic groups is often realized most clearly in the bond of marriage.

Interethnic marriage between Bugis and Lauje is a unification of two individuals and a meeting of two different value systems. Behind the customary processions, household conversations, and family gatherings, there lies a dynamic of communication full of negotiation. A Lauje wife, for example, feels awkward when attending a Bugis family mappacci event because the symbols used are not fully understood by her. Conversely, a Bugis husband feels clumsy when in the midst of a Lauje family that speaks with full frankness and uses a regional language that is foreign to him. Silence, which in Lauje culture is considered a form of respect, is sometimes perceived as a cold attitude from the Bugis perspective.

In a global context, studies on intercultural communication in cross-ethnic marriages are increasingly gaining attention in line with the rising mobility of people and the intensity of cultural interactions due to the currents of globalization (Heryadi & Silvana, 2013; Samovar, L., Porter, R., & McDaniel, 2013). This phenomenon is also reflected at the local level, as seen in Bugis-Lauje marriages in Tinombo. From everyday situations, Bugis-Lauje couples develop a distinctive communication pattern. Indonesian becomes the main bridge in the household, although Bugis or Lauje words still appear in certain moments such as customary prayers, greetings to parents, or intimate jokes between partners. Humor, patience, and family mediation often serve as ways to ease tensions arising from differences in communication styles. The presence of parents or siblings who understand both cultures often becomes the key to preventing misunderstandings from escalating into conflict.

From the perspective of intercultural communication theory, this phenomenon can be understood through the stress adaptation growth model by Young Yun Kim (Barnlund, 2017; Berlo, 1960; Littlejohn, S. W., & Foss, 2016) the early phase, couples experience stress in the form of misunderstandings, feelings of alienation, or pressure from extended family. Through the adaptation process, they learn their partner's language, adjust their communication styles, and seek customary compromises. The result is growth, where couples build a hybrid communication model (Kaddi, 2018). It is not entirely Bugis or Lauje, but a combination of both that arises from daily negotiations.

Interethnic marriage is not something new in Sulawesi; one relevant previous study is the examination of intercultural communication in marriage. Between the Bugis and Mandar ethnic groups in Lero Village, Pinrang Regency conducted by Hafifah, Hasni, and Falihin (2021). The results of this research show that intercultural communication in cross-ethnic marriages can proceed well when viewed from three main dimensions, cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Another aspect is shown in the research conducted by Sianturi, Tangkudung, and Harliama (2021) about mixed marriages of the Batak ethnic group in Towuti District, East Luwu Regency, which explains that the process of cultural assimilation mainly occurs through the daily communication of the couple and interaction with the surrounding environment. According to (Lestari, 2024; Wahyuni & Nurman, 2019) couple has different ways and times in adjusting to new customs and habits, but the willingness to maintain household harmony makes cultural differences not a significant obstacle.

Unlike previous research in Sulawesi, the phenomenon of Bugis–Lauje marriages in Tinombo shows that intercultural communication does not only take place in public spaces, but is actually most evident in the domestic space of the household. Darmastuti

(2013) explains that couples from these two ethnic groups must face differences in language, emotional expressions, and customs that occasionally trigger misunderstandings. However, they develop adaptive ways, such as using Indonesian as a communication bridge, utilizing humor to ease tension, and the presence of family mediators or customary figures who play an important role in interpreting meanings between the two cultures. Wedding rituals such as *mappacci* in Bugis tradition and *modutu* in Lauje tradition are not only understood as ceremonies, but also as symbolic media where both families negotiate, convey cultural messages, and simultaneously strengthen social cohesion.

Intercultural marriage is a sacred process that not only unites two individuals, but also brings together two different cultures, thus giving birth to meaningful intercultural communication (Al-Gazali, 2022; Lubis, Kurniawan, & Pohan, 2020; Saputro, 2023). This emphasizes the importance of intercultural adaptation to prevent misunderstandings, reduce the potential for conflict, and maintain harmony in cross-cultural marriages through effective communication (Mulyana, 2015; Triningtyas, 2019). So far, studies on inter-ethnic marriages in Indonesia have mostly focused on Javanese society or urban areas, while the local context of Sulawesi, especially in rural Central Sulawesi, is still rarely addressed. In fact, at the local level, customs, language, and family relations play a stronger role compared to formal norms or institutional rules. The gap in this research shows a need to understand how couples in rural areas manage cultural differences in their daily lives, as well as how rituals and customary mediators function as means of intercultural communication that maintain household harmony.

Based on the background, this research aims to understand the patterns of intercultural communication practiced by Bugis–Lauje couples in Tinombo, identify the adaptation strategies they use in facing cultural differences, and explain the role of rituals and customary mediators in bridging the symbolic differences between the two families. This research is expected to enrich the study of intercultural communication while also providing practical contributions to building harmony amidst the ethnic diversity of the Sulawesi community, particularly in Central Sulawesi.

Based on the theoretical framework, this study is grounded in the understanding that intercultural communication in Bugis–Lauje marriages represents a dynamic process of adaptation and negotiation. Drawing on Kim's (2001, 2017) Stress–Adaptation–Growth model, such marriages begin with communicative stress arising from language barriers, emotional differences, and social expectations, which gradually transform into adaptive behaviors such as adopting Indonesian as a neutral *lingua franca* and adjusting verbal or nonverbal expressions to sustain harmony. This process aligns with Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991), where spouses strategically converge to reduce social distance and diverge to preserve ethnic identity, showing that intercultural harmony is achieved through negotiated coexistence rather than assimilation. The role of kin mediators further reflects Ting-Toomey's (2017; 2005) Face-Negotiation Theory, emphasizing how family intervention maintains mutual respect and prevents loss of face during cross-cultural misunderstandings. Moreover, humor and patience, as observed adaptive strategies, resonate with Gudykunst's (2005) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory, highlighting that managing uncertainty with empathy and emotional restraint strengthens relational trust. Collectively, these perspectives frame the Bugis–Lauje marriage as a site of communicative evolution where stress leads to adaptation, and adaptation fosters intercultural growth and the emergence of a hybrid, resilient family identity.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to examine the patterns of intercultural communication in Bugis-Lauje marriage in Tinombo. The researchers selected six informants using purposive sampling techniques: two Bugis–Lauje married couples (aged 25–50 years, with a marriage period of 3–20 years), two close family members, and two traditional leaders who were actively involved in facilitating the interethnic marriage. The selection criteria are focused on couples with a sufficient marital duration to demonstrate a pattern of communication that has been formed and are willing to share their experiences openly.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with each informant for 60–90 minutes, using interview guidelines compiled based on communication adaptation dynamics, cultural negotiation processes, and ritual practices. Participatory observation was carried out during traditional marriage ceremonies and daily household interactions to capture authentic intercultural communication behaviors in natural settings. Secondary data includes archival documents from the local Office of Religious Affairs (KUA), ceremonial records, and visual documentation (photos and videos) that provide historical and cultural context. Data analysis follows Miles and Huberman's (2014) interactive model: data is systematically reduced by identifying relevant information from interviews, observations, and documents; findings are organized into thematic matrices that highlight communication strategies, cultural barriers, and adaptation mechanisms; and conclusions are drawn by identifying patterns and relationships that are repeated across data sources. Validity is ensured through triangulation of sources by cross-verifying information from spouses, family members, and traditional leaders, as well as conducting member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretation.

This study adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative research. Prior to participation, all informants were provided with information about the study's aims, procedures, and the voluntary nature of participation, and they gave informed consent for interviews, observation, and the use of anonymized quotations in publication. To protect privacy, personal identifiers were removed and participants were referred to using codes (e.g., Couple A/B and FGD Participant codes). Any visual materials used for documentation were anonymized by blurring identifiable features, and participants were informed that they could decline the use of photographs and withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Results and Discussion

1. Intercultural Patterns of Bugis-Lauje Couples in Tinombo

The results show that intercultural communication in Bugis–Lauje marriages in Tinombo is a continuous process of adaptation. Language choice, communication style, and participation in customary practices are key domains through which couples negotiate difference, learn from one another, and build mutual understanding.

In everyday interaction, Couple A (Bugis husband – Lauje wife) primarily uses Indonesian as their main medium of household communication. Indonesian functions as a practical and neutral bridge, particularly during the early stages of marriage, when differences in regional languages may trigger misunderstanding. As the Bugis husband in Couple A explained:

As a spouse married to a Lauje person, there are several things I have to adjust to, including my spouse's language, although I don't practice all languages in my daily life (Couple A, Bugis husband, Interview, June 22, 2024).

The Lauje wife in Couple A acknowledged that her language adaptation remains selective and largely limited to basic vocabulary used in daily routines. She stated:

In adaptation, not everything is adapted. For example, language adaptation only covers common words, such as *makan* (eat), *mandi* (bathe), *kemari* (come here), *mari* (come), and so on (Couple A, Lauje wife, Interview, June 22, 2024).



Figure 1 A Bugis–Lauje interethnic couple in Tinombo (image blurred to protect participant anonymity)

(Source: Researcher Documentation, 2024)

Beyond language, the Bugis husband in Couple A emphasized his ongoing efforts to understand Lauje linguistic expressions and to participate in his wife's customary practices, despite not fully mastering the Lauje language. Having been married for approximately 20 years, they reported that the communication pattern they developed has supported household harmony and helped prevent major conflict.

In contrast, Couple B (Lauje husband – Bugis wife) demonstrates a different adaptation pattern. While Indonesian remains their primary language in daily communication, the Lauje husband actively transmits the Lauje language to their children as part of cultural maintenance. The Bugis wife also participates in customs from both sides as a form of respect. However, differences in communication style initially created tension, particularly in the interpretation of tone and emotional expression. The Bugis wife from Couple B described:

Sometimes when my husband speaks loudly, he is not angry. In my Bugis family, a loud voice is considered emotional. So at first I often misunderstood (Couple B, Bugis wife, Interview, June 24, 2024).



Figure 2 A Lauje–Bugis interethnic couple in Tinombo (image blurred to protect participant anonymity)
(Source: Researcher documentation, 2024)

From the Lauje husband's perspective in Couple B (Lauje husband – Bugis wife), his speaking style is often firm in tone but is not intended to express anger. He explained: When I speak, I may sound firm, but that's normal in my family. Fortunately, my wife now understands, so there are no more misunderstandings (Couple B, Lauje husband, Interview, June 24, 2024).

In addition, he described how extended family members sometimes assist in clarifying meaning when differences in tone are interpreted negatively. He stated:

If there is a misunderstanding, I usually ask my brother-in-law to help explain my intentions. The thing is, my way of speaking is considered harsh, even though it is normal in my family (Couple B, Lauje husband, Interview, June 22, 2024).

These accounts indicate that differences in communication norms—particularly in tone and perceived emotional intensity—can create misunderstanding in the early stages of marriage, while kin mediation may function as a practical resource for message clarification within the household's wider family network.

This shows that the extended family plays an important role as a mediator, not only bridging the language gap but also interpreting the meaning of communication that may be interpreted differently by the couple. From the results of observations and FGDs, it was found that Indonesian is the main *lingua franca* in the daily interactions of Bugis–Lauje couples. The Bugis and Lauje languages are more often used in extended family forums, traditional events, or wedding rituals. It is in these formal traditional spaces that couples must adapt to cultural symbols that they do not yet fully understand. For example, in Bugis traditions such as *mappacci* or in Lauje events that are more communal and festive in nature. However, despite the language and communication style barriers, couples continue to employ various adaptation strategies.

First, learn your partner's language, even if only at a basic level, as a symbol of respect for each other's cultural identity. Second, use humor, patience, and open communication to reduce misunderstandings. Third, involve a family mediator or relative who understands both cultures. Fourth, follow the customs of both sides as a form of respect, even if you do not always understand their symbolic meaning deeply.

Indonesian is the main bridge for everyday conversation, because regional languages often lead to misinterpretation, especially when the extended family gathers. Even so,

husbands or wives slowly learn simple words from their partner's language, just to show good intentions and respect. This small effort is a sign that they are not closing themselves off, but are willing to open up space for meeting in the midst of differences.

This shows that Bugis–Lauje marriages in Tinombo create a new hybrid pattern of communication, a mixture of languages, customs, and mutual respect. Differences that once had the potential to become a divide now become a space for shared learning that enriches family life and strengthens social bonds within the community.

The accounts from Couples A and B, supported by observational and FGD data, suggest that adaptation in Bugis–Lauje marriages unfolds across multiple, interconnected domains. While Indonesian typically serves as the default language for daily household interaction, regional languages and cultural codes become more salient in extended-family settings and ritual contexts, where differences in tone, norms, and symbolic practices may generate misunderstanding. To manage these challenges, couples draw on a repertoire of practical strategies—ranging from selective language learning and code-switching to emotional regulation and kin mediation—while simultaneously maintaining participation in customary practices from both sides. Table 1 summarizes the main areas of difference identified in the study, their impacts on couples, and the adaptation strategies commonly employed to sustain marital harmony.

Table 1 The Impact of Differences and Adaptation Strategies in Bugis–Lauje Marriages

Aspects of Differences	Impact on Couples	Adaptation Strategies
Language	Misinterpretation in initial communication	Especially with an extended family, Indonesian as <i>lingua franca</i> , learning basic vocabulary of the partner's language
Communication Style	Bugis tend to be more reserved, Lauje are more assertive, potentially causing misunderstandings	Humor, patience, and open communication to lighten the mood
Cultural Symbols & Customs	Confusion or misinterpretation of the meaning of symbols in traditional rituals	The role of the extended family as mediators and explainers; active involvement in traditional ceremonies
Daily Life	Differences in parenting styles, ways of expressing affection, and social norms	Negotiation and compromise; integrating Bugis–Lauje practices into the household
Social Relations	Pressure from extended families to follow their respective traditions	Respecting and following the customs of both sides, even if not fully understood

(Source: Researcher Data Analysis Results, 2025)

The data indicate that Bugis–Lauje marriages involve the interaction of distinct cultural norms in language use, emotional expression, and customary participation. Language differences were reported as an early challenge, particularly during interactions with extended family members who relied on regional languages. To reduce

misunderstandings, couples commonly use Indonesian for daily communication while learning selected basic vocabulary from their spouse's language. Differences in communication style—especially tone and perceived emotional intensity—were also described as a source of initial tension, which couples managed through humor, patience, and open clarification. In addition, participants noted that customary symbols and ritual sequences were not always immediately understood by spouses from a different ethnic background; in such situations, extended family members frequently assisted by explaining meanings and guiding ceremonial procedures. Beyond communication and ritual contexts, couples also described differences in everyday practices (e.g., parenting preferences and household roles), which were typically managed through negotiation and compromise, alongside continued participation in customs from both families.

2. Cross-Cultural Communication Barriers in Bugis–Lauje Marriages in Tinombo

Data from interviews, observations, and focus group discussions indicate that barriers in Bugis–Lauje marriages are most pronounced in extended-family interactions and ritual contexts, where regional languages, differing communication norms, and culturally specific symbols shape meaning-making.

For Couple A (Bugis husband – Lauje wife), Indonesian is the primary language used in daily household communication. However, the Lauje wife reported difficulties following conversations when the husband's extended family relied on the **Bugis** language during family gatherings, which limited her participation and understanding. To manage this, the couple reported using Indonesian as the default language at home while continuing to participate in customary practices from both sides.

For Couple B (Lauje husband – Bugis wife), similar barriers emerged, particularly regarding differences in communication norms. The Bugis wife initially interpreted the Lauje husband's firm or loud tone as anger, while the husband framed it as a normal speaking style in his family. Over time, the couple reported adjusting through clarification and emotional restraint, and they also noted that relatives sometimes helped interpret intentions during misunderstandings.



Figure 3 Focus group discussion with community members in Tinombo
(Source: Researcher Documentation, 2024)

FGD participants also emphasized that misunderstandings commonly arise from differences in cultural norms and communication cues. One participant noted:

Barriers definitely exist because we come from two different cultures, and even within the same culture, there are often barriers, let alone between different cultures, for example, differences in voice, body language, values, norms, and so on (FGD Participant P1, June 23, 2024).

Another participant highlighted the emotional dimension of these differences, explaining that conversations in interethnic households may sometimes “not connect” not due to unwillingness to understand, but because each spouse draws on distinct value systems and habitual interpretive frames:

Sometimes the conversation doesn’t connect... not because we don’t want to understand, but because our ways of thinking and values are different (FGD Participant P2, June 23, 2024).

In everyday practice, these barriers were reported to become more visible during extended-family gatherings. While Indonesian generally functions as the primary language within the household, family events often involve a shift to regional languages. Spouses who are less proficient in these languages may become passive listeners and rely on nonverbal cues or brief explanations from their partners to follow the interaction. Participants described this situation as limiting full participation and contributing to a sense of social distance during family communication.

Table 2 summarizes the main categories of barriers identified in the dataset, including language barriers in extended-family contexts, differences in communication norms (particularly tone and expressiveness), and challenges in interpreting customary symbols during ritual activities.

Table 2. Main Barriers to Intercultural Communication for Bugis–Lauje Couples

Types of Barriers	Forms of Barriers	Impact on Couples
Language Barriers	Difficulty understanding a spouse’s regional language, particularly in extended-family gatherings or when interacting with guests.	Feelings of exclusion, misunderstanding, and limited participation in family interaction.
Differences in Communication Norms	Differences in interactional style (e.g., tone, directness, emotional expressiveness) may be interpreted differently across cultural backgrounds.	Potential misinterpretation, emotional tension, and differences in expressing or reading emotions.
Differences in Customs & Cultural Symbols	Participation in rituals without fully understanding the cultural meanings embedded in symbols and ceremonial sequences.	Confusion, awkwardness, and risk of miscommunication during customary forums.

(Source: Researcher Data Analysis Results, 2025)

In Bugis–Lauje marriages in Tinombo, participants reported that differences in communication style were evident in everyday interaction, particularly in the interpretation of tone, directness, and emotional expressiveness. Several interviewees described Bugis-side communication as tending to be softer in tone and more restrained

in emotional display, whereas Lauje-side communication was described as more direct and expressive, including the use of firmer intonation that was not necessarily intended as anger. These differences were reported to contribute to early misunderstandings, for example when a firm tone was interpreted as hostility, or when silence and restraint were interpreted as emotional distance.

Participants also described barriers related to differing cultural interpretations in both domestic and ritual contexts. Couples reported participating in rituals such as *mappacci* from the Bugis side or communal Lauje ceremonial events even when the symbolic meanings were not fully understood by the spouse from a different ethnic background. In such situations, participation was often framed as a form of respect toward the partner's family and cultural heritage, and clarification of ritual meanings was sometimes provided by relatives or customary figures during the event.

Discussion

The study reveals that intercultural communication between Bugis–Lauje couples in Tinombo is a dynamic process of continuous negotiation, adaptation, and meaning-making. Indonesian emerges as the dominant lingua franca in daily household interactions, functioning as a neutral and inclusive bridge that minimizes linguistic misunderstandings. Meanwhile, the Bugis and Lauje languages are selectively used in specific cultural domains where their use signals respect for heritage and maintains symbolic ties to each partner's ethnic identity.

Despite the unifying role of the national language, couples encounter several communication barriers. Linguistic differences remain a source of misinterpretation, particularly when interacting with extended families who predominantly use their regional languages. Differences in communication style often lead to mismatched emotional readings and subtle tensions. In addition, ritual symbols and cultural gestures sometimes create confusion, as each group interprets meaning through distinct cultural frameworks.

To sustain harmony, couples have developed a set of adaptive strategies that transform these barriers into opportunities for growth. They rely on humor, patience, and open dialogue to manage emotional misunderstandings; engage family mediators to interpret or clarify messages; and practice code-switching to accommodate cultural expectations in different contexts. Participation in both Bugis and Lauje rituals also serves as a symbolic form of respect and integration. Through these daily negotiations, couples create a hybrid communication model.

The communication patterns observed among Bugis–Lauje couples can be meaningfully interpreted through Young Yun Kim's (2001) *Stress–Adaptation–Growth (SAG) model* of intercultural communication. In the initial stages of their marriage, couples experience stress in the form of language barriers, differing emotional expressions, and external pressure from extended families to uphold their respective customs. This stress acts as the stimulus for adaptation, prompting spouses to modify their communicative behaviors—such as adopting Indonesian as a neutral lingua franca, adjusting tone and gestures to avoid misinterpretation, and learning selected vocabulary from each other's ethnic languages. Through repeated interaction, couples develop growth, reflected in their increasing intercultural competence, emotional resilience, and the ability to sustain relational harmony. This process confirms Kim's notion that adaptation is a continuous dialectical process through which individuals expand their capacity to navigate cultural diversity (Kim, 2001, 2017).

The findings are also consistent with Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) proposed by Howard Giles (Giles, 1973; Giles et al., 1991), which explains how individuals adjust their communication styles to manage social distance and identity. Within Bugis–Lauje marriages, convergence occurs when couples switch to Indonesian or soften their speech to foster mutual understanding and emotional comfort. In contrast, divergence is displayed when they intentionally use Bugis or Lauje languages in ritual or family contexts to affirm cultural pride and group belonging. This oscillation between convergence and divergence indicates that intercultural harmony is achieved not through assimilation, but through negotiated coexistence, where linguistic and behavioral flexibility becomes a form of cultural intelligence (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005; Giles et al., 1991).

The Face-Negotiation Theory developed by Stella Ting-Toomey (2017; 2005) further elucidates the role of family mediation in maintaining respect and relational balance. When communication conflicts arise, family elders and relatives function as mediators who help protect each partner's *face*—the social self-image associated with dignity and honor. By reframing statements, clarifying intentions, and softening confrontations, mediators prevent emotional escalation and preserve harmony within the extended family network. This aligns with Ting-Toomey's argument that collectivist societies, such as those in Indonesia, rely heavily on third-party mediation and *mutual face maintenance* to resolve intercultural tensions (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

Finally, the use of humor and patience as adaptive communication tools can be explained through Gudykunst's (Gallois et al., 2005) *Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory*. In intercultural encounters, individuals initially experience high levels of uncertainty and anxiety due to unfamiliar social cues. Bugis–Lauje couples manage these uncertainties by using humor to diffuse tension and patience to build mutual trust. These behaviors reduce psychological distance and foster predictability in interaction, allowing couples to communicate more openly and confidently over time. As Gudykunst (2005) posits, effective intercultural communication is achieved when anxiety is managed within an optimal threshold that encourages curiosity and empathy rather than fear or avoidance.

In a broader context, studies on intercultural communication within interethnic marriages have gained increasing scholarly attention alongside globalization and rising cultural mobility (Heryadi & Silvana, 2013; Samovar, L., Porter, R., & McDaniel, 2013). At the global level, these studies emphasize that effective intercultural relationships depend on adaptation, empathy, and the negotiation of meaning within culturally mixed households. Similar findings are evident in Indonesia, where intercultural communication manifests through daily negotiations of language, values, and customs. For example, Hafifah, Hasni, and Falihin (Hafifah Sh et al., 2021) found that in Bugis–Mandar marriages in Pinrang Regency, harmony in interethnic unions is sustained through three interconnected dimensions: cognitive understanding, emotional empathy, and behavioral adaptation. Likewise, Sianturi, Tangkudung, and Harilama (Sianturi et al., 2021), in their study of Batak mixed marriages in East Luwu, observed that cultural assimilation develops primarily through everyday communication and interaction with the surrounding community. These findings are consistent with the present study, which also identifies communication style adjustment and emotional regulation as key strategies for maintaining marital harmony.

However, the Bugis–Lauje marriages in Tinombo offer a distinct contextual contribution by situating intercultural adaptation within rural Central Sulawesi, where cultural identity and family networks remain deeply rooted in traditional structures.

Unlike the urban-based studies of Bugis–Mandar and Batak families, this research focuses on the domestic sphere as the primary setting for cultural negotiation, where language use, humor, and ritual participation serve as adaptive tools for maintaining relational stability. The study further reveals that family mediation plays a crucial communicative role in preventing misunderstandings from escalating into conflict.

Moreover, this study highlights that intercultural harmony in Bugis–Lauje marriages is achieved not through cultural uniformity but through hybridization, where both partners selectively integrate linguistic and ritual elements from their respective traditions. This hybrid communication model expands upon earlier findings by Kaddi (Kaddi, 2018), who first noted the emergence of hybrid interaction patterns in Bugis–Kaili marriages in Palu. The present study, however, deepens this understanding by demonstrating how rituals such as *mappacci* and *modutu* serve not only as ceremonial practices but also as symbolic spaces for cultural dialogue and identity negotiation. Consequently, the Bugis–Lauje case offers a novel perspective on intercultural communication studies in Indonesia, emphasizing the micro-level processes of adaptation and the central role of kin-based mediation in sustaining harmony within rural, multicultural families.

The findings of this study suggest that Bugis–Lauje families in Tinombo exemplify how multiethnic families function as microcosms of social cohesion in rural multicultural societies. By navigating linguistic and cultural differences through humor, empathy, and ritual participation, these families extend harmony from the domestic sphere to the broader community. This mirrors global observations that multiethnic families enhance collective belonging and intergroup solidarity by connecting diverse cultural networks within one social environment (Calegare, Lopes, & Zacarias, 2021). Similar to Rahman et al. (2022), who found that local wisdom fosters cooperation and tolerance in post-conflict Aceh, the Bugis–Lauje case demonstrates how shared rituals and family mediation embody indigenous mechanisms of peacebuilding and reconciliation. The presence of extended kinship and communal spaces comparable to the *gotong royong* traditions observed by Asmal and Latief (2023) in Indonesian coastal settlements. From a communication standpoint, this aligns with the findings of Liu et al. (2018) and Cheong (2006), who emphasize that interpersonal and place-based communication serves as a bridge linking cultural differences and strengthening neighborhood belonging. Therefore, Bugis–Lauje families can be viewed as bridging agents of community cohesion, transforming cultural diversity into everyday collaboration and mutual respect. Their ability to integrate language, ritual, and kinship not only sustains household harmony but also contributes to the social capital and resilience of multiethnic communities in rural Indonesia.

Harmony in multiethnic families is not the product of cultural homogenization but rather the outcome of continuous negotiation and mutual adaptation. Within such families, differences in language, communication styles, and value systems are not erased; instead, they are transformed into opportunities for growth and understanding. This aligns with Wang's (2012) view that effective family communication planning, especially in multilingual contexts, allows parents to integrate diverse cultural practices into cohesive domestic routines. Similarly, Warner Colaner et al. (2023) emphasize that identity negotiation within multi-ethnic families depends on open dialogue and empathy, ensuring that differences become a source of enrichment rather than conflict. Research by Yodanis and Lauer (2017) also reinforces the notion that interethnic couples consciously maintain cultural distinctions as a means of mutual respect and intercultural learning, thereby embodying the principle of multiculturalism in intimate relationships. Furthermore, Meyer and Fozdar (2022) illustrate that intercultural negotiation in mixed families fosters

adaptability and tolerance, forming what they term a “complex but ordinary” dynamic, where cultural hybridity becomes normalized through daily interaction. The Bugis–Lauje families in this study exemplify this ideology by combining humor, patience, and familial mediation, creating a communicative space that validates differences while nurturing harmony. In this way, intercultural marriage serves as both a personal and ideological project of coexistence, demonstrating that true unity in diversity emerges not from assimilation, but from the respectful negotiation of difference.

The findings indicate that Bugis–Lauje families exemplify the functional value of intercultural communication through two key dynamics: identity flexibility and the strengthening of cross-ethnic kinship networks. The flexible management of ethnic identity allows individuals to navigate between linguistic, cultural, and emotional boundaries without losing their sense of belonging. This adaptive fluidity echoes Mahmoud’s (2009) concept of pragmatic identity negotiation, where individuals adjust cultural expressions according to relational and situational contexts. Similarly, Kesici (2025) and Conway (2007) emphasize that hybrid and transnational identities can enhance social mobility and mutual understanding, a pattern also visible among Bugis–Lauje couples who selectively integrate Bugis and Lauje traditions while maintaining shared household values. At the same time, kinship networks in multiethnic communities, mediated through rituals and family gatherings, strengthen social cohesion and interethnic solidarity. This aligns with Hadawiah et al. (2025) and Ridwan et al. (Ridwan et al., 2025), who found that ritual communication in South Sulawesi and the Moluccas reinforces cooperation across religious and ethnic boundaries. By combining adaptive identity practices with inclusive kinship systems, Bugis–Lauje families function as cultural bridges that enhance both relational harmony and community resilience.

Despite these strengths, intercultural communication within Bugis–Lauje families also entails subtle dysfunctions. When one regional language dominates the interaction, partners from the non-dominant group often experience emotional distance or exclusion, a phenomenon similar to what Alam et al. (2025) observed in Pashtun families where Urdu overshadowed regional Pashto. In such contexts, the emotional intimacy associated with local languages can inadvertently heighten feelings of exclusion for those less proficient (Peressotti & Miozzo, 2025). Misinterpretations of tone and rhythm further complicate communication, as variations in prosody may be perceived as emotional excess or disrespect (Henriksen, 2013; Ying, 2023). This pattern resonates with multilingual families elsewhere, where differing speech styles trigger misunderstandings unless consciously managed through accommodation strategies (Dumanig, David, & Shanmuganathan, 2013; Ferreira, 2016). Consequently, while linguistic diversity enriches cultural expression, it also introduces subtle hierarchies within communication, revealing that intercultural harmony requires ongoing negotiation not only of meaning but also of linguistic power and emotional accessibility.

The findings of this study underscore the need for institutional and community-level interventions to strengthen intercultural harmony within interethnic marriages, such as those between Bugis and Lauje families. At the institutional level, the Office of Religious Affairs (*Kantor Urusan Agama-KUA*) and marriage registrars (*Pegawai Pencatat Nikah-PPN*) could develop pre-marital intercultural communication modules that go beyond doctrinal instruction. These modules should focus on micro-skills of communication and include role-play simulations of mediation scenarios that commonly occur in multiethnic households. By integrating intercultural communication theory with practical exercises, premarital counseling can better prepare couples to navigate linguistic nuances, emotional differences, and symbolic misunderstandings.

At the community level, local customary councils and village administrations can play a vital role by formalizing a family mediation handbook for elders and traditional leaders who frequently serve as cultural intermediaries. This guide should outline ethical standards, paraphrasing techniques, and culturally sensitive ways of explaining ritual symbols during family gatherings or marriage ceremonies. Meanwhile, family education programs could introduce a booklet on healthy code-switching and intonation etiquette across ethnic groups, helping spouses use bilingualism as a bridge rather than a barrier. To sustain these initiatives, community cultural programs could establish bilingual ritual literacy forums that translate and explain the meanings of traditional ceremonies such as *mappacci* and *modutu* in accessible, inclusive ways. Together, these strategies not only promote smoother intercultural communication in marriages but also enhance social cohesion and mutual respect within rural multiethnic communities across Indonesia.

Conclusion

This study concludes that intercultural communication within Bugis–Lauje marriages in Tinombo represents a dynamic process of adaptation, negotiation, and cultural hybridization. The findings reveal that Indonesian functions as a neutral lingua franca in daily life, while the Bugis and Lauje languages are selectively used in ritual and kinship contexts as markers of cultural identity. Differences in communication style initially create misinterpretations, but couples develop adaptive mechanisms through humor, patience, and open dialogue. Family mediators and shared participation in rituals such as *mappacci* and *modutu* play a pivotal role in maintaining harmony, transforming potential cultural barriers into bridges of understanding. Over time, these strategies give rise to a hybrid communication model that blends linguistic, emotional, and ritual elements from both traditions, enabling families to maintain relational balance and foster community cohesion.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the broader field of intercultural communication studies in Indonesia by deepening the understanding of how adaptation operates within the domestic sphere of rural, multiethnic families, a context that has received limited scholarly attention. By applying Kim’s Stress–Adaptation–Growth (SAG) model, Giles’s Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), Ting-Toomey’s Face-Negotiation Theory, and Gudykunst’s Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) framework in a localized ethnographic setting, this study demonstrates that intercultural harmony emerges not from cultural assimilation but from negotiated coexistence. The research also contributes practically by proposing context-sensitive policy recommendations to institutionalize communication competence and strengthen cross-ethnic kinship networks at the community level.

Nevertheless, the study recognizes certain limitations. The small number of participants and the focus on a single rural district limit the generalizability of findings to other regions or ethnic pairings. Furthermore, this research primarily captures verbal and observable communication, leaving nonverbal subtleties and psychological dimensions underexplored. Future studies could expand by comparing multiple interethnic marriage contexts across different provinces, integrating longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to assess how communication adaptation evolves over time. Such efforts would provide a more comprehensive picture of how intercultural families contribute to Indonesia’s broader project of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity through diversity in everyday life).

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