

Indexical Hierarchies in Ulu Kapuas Malay Mantras: Vernacular Islamic Multilingualism in West Kalimantan

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Ritual multilingualism in Islamic communities is often viewed as syncretic, hybrid, or acculturative. Such forms rarely reflect an indexical hierarchy of language use. This study examines how linguistic hierarchy is organized within the Ulu Kapuas Malay or Melayu Ulu Kapuas (MUK) incantations of West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The study draws on 72 incantation texts categorized by the community as tawar, cuca, ilmu, and jayau, supported by in-depth interviews with custodians of the MUK cultural traditions, as well as contextual field documentation. The data were coded according to language choice (MUK, Arabic, and Indonesian) and structural position within the ritual text (opening, core, and closing), and then analyzed qualitatively to identify recurrent functional patterns in ritual performance. The interpretation focuses on how these patterned distributions index religious authority, cultural legitimacy, and communicative mediation. The findings show that ritual multilingualism in this corpus is not an eclectic mixture but a structured semiotic hierarchy. MUK consistently serves as the performative core of ritual action and grounds it in emic cosmology. Arabic appears primarily in the opening and closing formulas of the incantations, serving to frame the rituals and sacralizing and legitimizing in ritual. Meanwhile, Indonesian functions more peripherally as a narrative and mediating code, occasionally supporting communicative clarity without displacing the ritual role of the MUK. By demonstrating that local efficacy and Islamic legitimacy are jointly produced through distinct linguistic roles, this study enhances the socio-linguistic understanding of the relationship between language and religion from the perspective of local communities.

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Public Interest Statement

This study examines the use of language in ritual incantations known to the Ulu Kapuas Malay community in West Kalimantan, namely tawar, cuca, ilmu, and jayau. Three languages are used in these incantations: Ulu Kapuas Malay (or MUK), Arabic, and Indonesian. Each serves a distinct function. The Ulu Kapuas Malay language serves as the primary language, conveying ritual messages and activating ritual efficacy. Arabic provides spiritual legitimacy, while Indonesian functions peripherally as a mediating code. This study highlights the use of language to index sacred authority within vernacular Islamic practices among communities situated outside formal religious institutions. This research contributes to broader debates on language, culture, and religion.

Introduction

Ritual multilingualism has become an important concern in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology because it reveals how language participates in the production of authority, legitimacy, and identity in socially consequential events. In studies of language and identity, identity is not treated as a fixed essence but as something that is interactionally and semiotically produced through linguistic practice (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Within the sociology of language and religion, this insight is especially important because religious belonging is repeatedly enacted through

patterned discourse, ritual performance and socially recognized forms of speaking ([Omoniyi & Fishman, 2006](#)). From this perspective, ritual discourse is not merely a vehicle for expressing belief; it is also a site where linguistic forms acquire social value and mediate relations between sacred authority and local cultural belonging.

A growing body of scholarship shows that multilingualism in religious contexts rarely involves languages occupying equal positions. Rather, different languages and registers tend to be unevenly distributed, with each acquiring distinct semiotic and ideological functions ([Agha, 2006](#); [Blommaert et al., 2005](#)). In Islamic contexts, Arabic is often associated with transcendence, scriptural authority, and revelation. Arabic therefore holds a high symbolic status and also functions as a marker of moral and religious authority ([Alsaawi, 2022](#); [Rippin, 2013](#)). Therefore, ritual multilingualism must be understood as a mixture of codes and semiotic arrangements, in which languages have a hierarchy according to their perceived status and scope.

Despite this insight, much of the literature on language and religion still pays greater attention to institutional frameworks, sacred texts, pedagogy, or urban religion than to vernacular ritual practices in peripheral Muslim communities. As Subair et al. ([Subair et al., 2024](#)) noted, recent literature on multilingualism in Islam demonstrates that language is used for religious moderation, community communication, and Islamic education. However, studies have shown that the use of language in religious practices can generate power through meanings and assumptions about symbols. Keane ([Keane, 2018](#)) shows the relationship between language use and transcendence and social values. However, the discourse on vernacular rituals within rural Muslim communities remains under-researched and has not yet featured prominently in scholarship on language and religion ([Fudge et al., 2022](#); [Green, 2023](#); [Wijaya et al., 2025](#)). This fact is important to highlight as it risks diminishing the contribution of local ritual practices to the academic discourse on language and religion.

The inland region of Kapuas Hulu, West Kalimantan, is an important site for addressing this issue. Among the Malay community in this region, ritual genres such as *tamar*, *cuca*, *ilmu*, and *jayau* preserve a rich verbal repertoire that brings together local Malay expressions, Arabic-derived formulas, and, in more limited cases, Indonesian. Studies on inland have revealed that this language is the major language in the upper reaches of the Kapuas River region and possesses a social system linked to social etiquette and cultural authority ([Yusriadi et al., 2023](#)). Related studies have also linked agricultural culture, ethnobotany, and mystical beliefs ([Faisal et al., 2018](#); [Hermansyah, 2010](#); [Rheva & Seko, 2025](#); [Sukma et al., 2019](#); [Taazimiyah et al., 2014](#)). However, these studies have not yet provided a sociolinguistic explanation of how specific linguistic forms carry different degrees and types of semiotic power, nor how multilingual practices are structured with how linguistic authority is distributed within multilingual practice. As a result, these practices are often reduced to syncretism and cultural convergence.

This gap becomes more significant when viewed through the concepts of indexical order and enregisterment. [Silverstein's \(2003\)](#) notion of indexical order makes it possible to examine how linguistic forms acquire layered social meanings beyond referential content, whereas [Agha's \(2006\)](#) concept of enregisterment helps explain how recurrent forms become socially recognizable as appropriate for particular roles, personae, and domains. More recent work has continued to show that enregisterment is shaped by ideology, circulation, and the material conditions of use ([Graber, 2022](#)). In ritual settings, such an approach allows us to move beyond descriptive claims about language mixing and instead ask how and why some linguistic resources come to frame ritual authority, others to perform ritual action, and others still to occupy more peripheral narrative roles. Scholarship on ritual speech has likewise stressed that ritual efficacy cannot be reduced to heteroglossic coexistence alone; it depends on patterned voice, authority, and performative evidence within specific semiotic traditions ([Tomlinson, 2019](#)).

This article addresses this gap by examining how linguistic hierarchy is organized in the ritual discourse of the Ulu Kapuas Malays. Specifically, it asks how Ulu Kapuas Malay (Melayu Ulu Kapuas or MUK) as a local Malay, Arabic, and Indonesian are distributed across the mantra structure, what semiotic roles those distributions perform, and how they contribute to ritual efficacy and legitimacy. Drawing on a corpus of seventy-two mantra texts supported by interviews and contextual field documentation, this study argues that ritual multilingualism in Ulu Kapuas Malay is not an eclectic mixture of codes but a structured indexical formation. The novelty of this study lies in three contributions. First, it shifts attention from institutional and urban Islamic multilingualism to vernacular ritual practice in a rural Malay community that remains underrepresented in broader sociolinguistic debates. Second, it shows that the co-presence of MUK, Arabic, and Indonesian is organized through a relatively stable hierarchy of semiotic functions rather than through undifferentiated syncretism. Third, it contributes to the study of language and religion by demonstrating how local cultural efficacy and Islamic legitimacy are co-produced through patterned linguistic distribution in a non-institutional ritual domain, a dynamic that also resonates with wider Malay–Arabic textual histories in Southeast Asia ([Kooria, 2019](#)).

Literature Review

This study approaches ritual multilingualism not as a loose coexistence of languages but as a structured semiotic formation in which different linguistic resources acquire unequal authority, value, and function. To explain this structure, this article integrates four related concepts: indexical order, enregisterment, language ideology, and religious semiotic ideology. Taken together, these concepts make it possible to analyze not only which languages appear in ritual discourse but also how they come to occupy particular positions, why those positions are socially recognized as appropriate, and what kinds of authority they are understood to carry. In this sense, the theoretical framework is designed as an analytic model for interpreting patterned linguistic distribution in ritual texts rather than as a descriptive inventory of concepts.

The first key concept is the indexical order. [Silverstein \(2003\)](#) argues that linguistic forms do not merely denote referential content; they also index social meanings that can accumulate across the levels of interpretation. A linguistic feature may first point to an immediate interactional context, then become associated with broader social values, and eventually acquire higher-order meanings that appear naturalized, authoritative or institutionally ratified. In multilingual ritual discourse, this insight is crucial because languages do not function as interchangeable codes. Their placement within the structure of ritual speech may indicate different levels of efficacy, legitimacy, and symbolic force. Thus, when certain forms recur in openings, others in the core body, and others in closings or explanatory segments, these distributions are not random. They may reflect an ordered semiotic hierarchy in which linguistic resources are linked to different domains of authority and action ([Blommaert et al., 2005](#); [Silverstein, 2003](#)).

Yet indexical order alone does not fully explain how these associations become socially recognizable and stable over time. For this reason, the second concept, enregisterment, is equally important. Agha ([2005, 2006](#)) uses this concept to explain how recurrent forms of language become socially recognized as registers associated with particular personae, activities, and values. Enregisterment is therefore not just repetition; it is the social process through which a way of speaking becomes typified, expected, and normatively legible. In ritual discourse, this helps explain why certain Arabic formulae may be heard as appropriate for authorization or sacral framing, while particular vernacular forms are recognized as proper vehicles of performative action. Enregisterment also clarifies that ritual efficacy is not carried by linguistic form alone, but by the social recognition that particular forms are the “right” ones for particular ritual functions. More recent work has further shown that enregisterment is shaped by ideology, circulation, and material conditions, which means that ritual registers must be understood as socially sedimented rather than linguistically inherent ([Agha, 2005, 2006](#); [Graber, 2022](#)).

The third concept, language ideology, explains why different linguistic forms are valued differently in the first place. Language ideologies are not merely opinions about language; they are socially shared assumptions about linguistic forms and their moral, cultural, and political significance ([Duranti, 2005](#); [Gal, 2005](#); [Irvine, 2022](#); [Irvine & Gal, 2000](#); [Kroskrity, 2010](#)). Such ideologies help organize distinctions between languages, speakers, and domains of use. They also shape which linguistic forms are heard as sacred, authentic, modern, local, refined, accessible, or powerful. In the present study, language ideology is central because ritual multilingualism is not only a matter of formal distribution but also of ideological differentiation. Arabic may be ideologically associated with Islam, transcendence, and textual authority; local Malay may be associated with cultural intimacy, ancestral continuity, and performative efficacy; Indonesian may be associated with broader intelligibility or mediation. What matters analytically is that these values are not reducible to grammar or lexical origin. They emerge from ideological processes that differentiate and rank linguistic resources according to socially recognized meanings ([Duranti, 2005](#); [Gal, 2005](#); [Irvine & Gal, 2000](#); [Kroskrity, 2010](#)). Comparative work on Acehnese marine ritual discourse similarly suggests that ritual language is ideologically organized rather than merely expressive ([Pratiwy et al., 2024](#)).

The fourth concept, religious semiotic ideology, sharpens this framework by focusing on assumptions regarding how signs work in religious life. [Keane \(2018\)](#) defines semiotic ideology as people’s underlying assumptions about what signs are, what they do, and the consequences they produce. In religious contexts, this is especially important because ritual participants may treat words, names, formulae, and recitations not simply as symbolic expressions but as signs with material, moral, and efficacious consequences. This perspective helps explain why formulaic Arabic expressions may be treated as sacralizing or legitimizing, even when they do not carry the main performative burden of the ritual act. This also helps explain why vernacular expressions may remain indispensable to ritual efficacy, even in settings shaped by the broader Islamic authority. In other words, religious semiotic ideology makes visible the culturally specific assumptions through which some signs are understood to invoke transcendence, some to enact force, and some to mediate meaning across audiences. Studies of ritual voice and authority similarly suggest that ritual speech gains force through recognizable semiotic positioning rather than heteroglossia alone ([Keane 2018](#); [Tomlinson, 2019](#)). Research on Kitab Kuning discourse further indicates that Islamic textual authority is not ideologically uniform but is shaped by particular interpretive and discursive traditions ([Iswahyudi et al., 2026](#)).

Taken together, these four concepts provide an analytical foundation for this study. Indexical order explains how linguistic forms acquire layered social meanings; enregisterment explains how those meanings become recognizable as appropriate to particular ritual roles; language ideology explains how linguistic differences are socially valued and hierarchized; and religious semiotic ideology explains why specific signs are treated as capable of producing sacred, moral, or efficacious effects. This integrated framework allows us to move beyond the generic claim that Ulu Kapuas ritual discourse is multilingual. Instead, it asks how multilingualism is organized through the patterned distribution of authority across languages.

Accordingly, the framework guides the analysis concretely. The ritual texts are examined in relation to the language used and their structural position within the mantra—opening, core, and closing—of the mantra. The analysis then asks what kinds of semiotic work each language performs. If a language recurs in the core of ritual action, it may index performative efficacy and local cosmological grounding. If another language appears consistently in openings and closings, it may function as a higher-order framing code that authorizes and sacralizes the act of prayer. If a third language appears only in limited or explanatory segments, it may function as a mediating or peripheral code. The point is not to assume these roles in advance but to demonstrate how they emerge from recurrent textual patterning and emic interpretation. Thus, the theoretical framework serves as an operational lens for analyzing ritual multilingualism as a structured indexical hierarchy rather than undifferentiated syncretism.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative ethnolinguistic approach grounded in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics to examine how ritual language functions as a semiotic resource for indexing religious authority, cultural belonging, and communicative mediation. Given its focus on meaning-making processes embedded in ritual practice, qualitative design is particularly appropriate for capturing the symbolic and contextual dimensions of language use.

The primary data consisted of documented occult texts collected through longitudinal field engagement in Embau between 2003 and 2025. This extended timeframe reflects sustained scholarly involvement, rather than a single continuous phase of data collection. The earlier dataset (2003) originated from doctoral research conducted at the Institute of Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) ([Hermansyah, 2010](#); [Hermansyah & Yusriadi, 2003](#)). These materials were systematically revisited and selectively updated in 2025 ([Hui, 2025](#)) to ensure consistency in the data selection and analytical procedures. To maintain comparability over time, uniform criteria for corpus construction, classification, and interpretation were applied throughout the dataset.

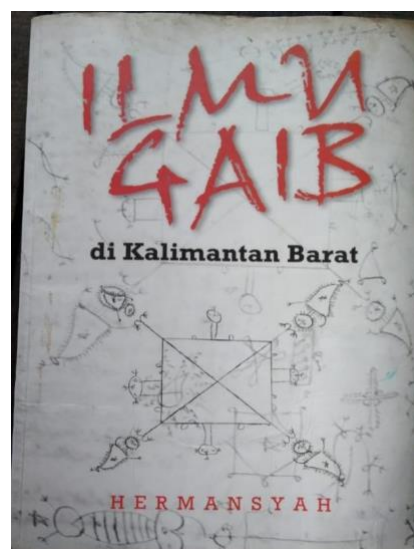
Contextual validation was supported through engagement with members of the “Embau Serumpun” cultural preservation community, which plays an active role in maintaining Embau cultural identity, including ritual language. Within this community, ritual traditions and customary law remain deeply embedded and continue to operate alongside formal legal systems ([Munawar et al., 2025](#); [Nordin et al., 2025](#)).

Informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, with selection criteria emphasizing locally recognized expertise in ritual knowledge, particularly *tawar*, *cuca*, *ilmu*, and related verbal practices, as well as active participation and community acknowledgment. Supplementary interview data were obtained from three Embau ritual practitioners in Kapuas Hulu who served as key informants because of their direct familiarity with ritual texts, ritual procedures, and local understandings of efficacy. In addition, two comparative informants from Embau Serumpun were involved for validation purposes. Embau Serumpun is a cultural organization established by Embau figures to safeguard, maintain, and revitalize Embau cultural heritage in Kapuas Hulu. Although the number of informants was relatively limited, this reflects the specialized and restricted nature of ritual knowledge within the community. The interviews were not intended to provide a statistically representative sample but to support emic interpretation, contextual validation, and triangulation of the textual corpus. This sampling strategy enabled access to key knowledge holders and enhanced the credibility of the data. All participant identities were anonymized to ensure ethical protection.

The primary corpus comprises seventy-two (72) ritual texts derived mainly from documented sources ([Hermansyah, 2010](#); [Yusriadi & Hermansyah, 2003](#)) (see [Figure 1](#) (a) and (b)). These texts include healing (*tawar*), affective and protective (*cuca-jayan*), and offensive/defensive (*ilmu*) spells, representing a broad range of ritual functions, such as healing, protection, attraction, neutralization of danger, and attack. This diversity provides a robust empirical basis for identifying recurring linguistic patterns. Supplementary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with practitioners and field observations of ritual contexts, allowing for methodological triangulation.



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. (a) Cover book Yusriadi & Hermansyah, 2003. (b) Cover book Hermansyah, 2007, which encloses the forms of MUK Mantra.

All texts were systematically coded according to language use (MUK, Arabic, and Indonesian) and internal structure (opening, core, and closing segments). A structured coding scheme was developed to capture the linguistic distribution, functional roles, and placement of Islamic formulae and vernacular metaphors within ritual discourse. The coding was conducted iteratively and cross-checked to ensure consistency, transparency, and reliability.

To ensure analytical transparency, each mantra was segmented into three structural positions: opening, core/body, and closing. Each segment was then coded according to linguistic code, semiotic function, and indexical value. This coding procedure made it possible to identify whether particular languages were repeatedly associated with specific positions and functions within the ritual text (see [Table 1](#)). The analysis therefore moved from the descriptive mapping of multilingual forms to an interpretation of how ritual authority, local efficacy, and religious legitimacy are distributed across different linguistic resources.

Table 1. Coding Scheme for the Analysis of Ritual Multilingualism

Dimension	Operational definition	Categories	Analytical purpose
Ritual genre	The emic type and function of each ritual text	Tawar, cuaca, ilmu, jayau	To identify the ritual context in which multilingual forms occur
Linguistic code	The language or linguistic source used in each segment	Ulu Kapuas Malay/MUK; Arabic or Arabic-derived formulae; Indonesian; mixed forms	To map the multilingual composition of the corpus
Structural position	The location of each linguistic form within the mantra	Opening; core/body; closing	To examine whether particular languages are associated with specific ritual positions
Semiotic function	The role performed by a linguistic form in the ritual text	Sacral framing; performative action; legitimization; narration; mediation	To identify how different languages perform different ritual functions
Indexical value	The social, cultural, or religious meaning indexed by a linguistic form	Islamic authority; local efficacy; emic cosmology; communicative accessibility	To interpret how linguistic hierarchy is produced in ritual discourse

Dimension	Operational definition	Categories	Analytical purpose
Supporting evidence	The basis used to justify coding and interpretation	Recurrent textual pattern; formulaic placement; vernacular metaphor; informant explanation	To strengthen the credibility and transparency of interpretation

The data analysis was conducted in three stages. First, descriptive linguistic mapping was conducted to identify the distribution and frequency of the linguistic codes across the corpus. Second, functional analysis examined how different languages are positioned within the ritual structure, distinguishing between framing elements and core components of ritual action. Third, interpretive analysis drew on the theoretical frameworks of indexicality and indexical order (Silverstein, 2003) and enregisterment (Agha, 2006) to explain how linguistic choices signal social meanings. The interpretations of textual patterns were compared with the informants' perspectives on efficacy, legitimacy, and appropriate language use. The analysis prioritizes an emic perspective, emphasizing how the participants understand and evaluate the interaction between Islamic and vernacular linguistic resources. Triangulation was further strengthened through member checking with knowledgeable individuals from Kapuas Hulu to ensure that the interpretations remained contextually grounded. Finally, the researchers acknowledge their positionality. Prior familiarity with the Embau community facilitated access and rapport but also required reflexive awareness. Analytical decisions were continuously evaluated through collaborative discussions and cross-validation to minimize bias and maintain methodological rigor.

Results

The analysis of seventy-two ritual texts shows that ritual multilingualism among the Ulu Kapuas Malays is not an undifferentiated mixture of codes, but a patterned distribution of linguistic resources across ritual structure. Three languages recur in the corpus: Ulu Kapuas Malay (Melayu Ulu Kapuas, hereafter MUK), Arabic, and Indonesian. Their distribution is not random. MUK consistently occupies the core body of ritual action, Arabic appears predominantly in opening and closing formulas, and Indonesian occurs only sporadically, usually in descriptive or mediating segments. This recurrent pattern indicates a functional hierarchy in which each language performs a different semiotic role within ritual discourse. A concise overview of the corpus supports this pattern. MUK appears across the corpus and is the only code that consistently carries the central performative burden of the mantra. Arabic or Arabic-derived formulae occur in fifty-two of the seventy-two texts, most often at the boundaries of the ritual text, especially in openings and closings. Indonesian is present only in a limited number of texts and does not emerge as a stable framing code. Instead, it appears in short descriptive, enumerative, or explanatory clauses. This distribution suggests that multilingualism in the corpus is structured by functional differentiation rather than by free alternation.

MUK as the Performative Core

MUK forms the performative center of ritual discourse. It is in MUK that ritual action is carried out, threats are articulated, entities are addressed, and efficacy is verbally enacted. This is visible in texts such as Tawar Antu Semati Anak and Tawar Tumpul, where the core lines are expressed in MUK rather than in Arabic or Indonesian. In one representative example, the mantra Tawar Antu Semati Anak reads:

*Semati anak mati anak
Mati ditingang tanah tamak
Totak buluh panyang panak
Pakai nyuman porut si mati anak*

A more natural English translation is

*Semati Anak, dead child,
buried and pressed into the greedy earth,
cut with long and short bamboo,
to boil the entrails of a dead child's spirit.*

This passage does not merely describe a condition; it performs symbolic aggression against a disturbing supernatural force. Its force lies in locally intelligible imagery, metaphor, and verbal commands. The ritual effect is therefore not attached to a sacred language in the abstract but to a vernacular code understood as capable of acting upon affliction through culturally grounded verbal efficacy. A similar pattern appears in Tawar Tumpul:

*Rumu' abu'
Tumpah padi
Aku nawar kona' kisai antu*

Bismillah

A more idiomatic translation is

*Ashes heap,
rice spilled,
I neutralize the ghost's disturbance,
In the name of God.*

Here, the ritual act itself is performed in MUK through the clause *aku nawar kona' kisai antu*, while the Arabic formula appears only at the edge of the text. This distinction is analytically important. In ritual discourse, MUK serves not merely as a medium of communication but also as a means of addressing and acting upon the supernatural. Through this vernacular code, specific ritual actions are performed. Its recurrent use across most of the corpus, except in a limited number of segments where Indonesian appears, indicates that MUK is the principal medium of ritual efficacy and grounds it in emic cosmology.

Arabic as a Framing and Legitimizing Code

Arabic and Arabic-derived expressions appear frequently, but their role differs from that of MUK. Rather than replacing the vernacular in the core body of ritual action, Arabic most often frames the mantra by opening, closing, or sacralizing it. Formulae such as *bismillah*, *Allahumma*, *la ilaha illallah*, and *Muhammadur Rasulullah* recur across the corpus, especially in texts associated with stronger ritual potency. Their patterned placement suggests that Arabic functions as a legitimizing and sacralizing code. Of the seventy-two texts in the corpus, fifty-two contained Arabic material, usually at the beginning and/or end of the mantra. This can be seen clearly in *Tawar Sumpit*:

*Bismillah
Pinang tumbuh di bukit
Aku menyanar antu menyumpit
Aku punya tawar bismillah
Bisa tawar aku tabar mulut antu
Bismillah*

A smoother translation is as follows:

*In the name of God.
The areca palm grows on the hill.
I lean aside, and the ghost shoots with a blowpipe
My healing charm is under the name of God.
I neutralize the poison and seal the ghost's mouth.
In the name of God.*

The Arabic element does not dominate the body of the text; instead, it encloses and authorizes it. The opening and closing *Bismillah* confer an Islamic frame on the ritual action, while the intervening lines in MUK carry the mantra's operative force. This recurrent arrangement indicates that Arabic indexes sacred legitimacy rather than primary performative actions.

Another representative case is *Cuca Penunuk*.

*Allahuman jaya pun human
Ya malaikat syarabul jalil
Ancurkanlah ati (si anu)
Seperti air dalam daun keladi
Supaya tunduk ganuk kepadaku
Berkat doa la ilahailallah
Berkat muhammadur Rasulullah*

A more natural translation is

*O Allah, the Glorious,
O exalted angel,
break the heart (the named person),
like water trembling on a taro leaf,
so that they submit and incline toward me,
by the blessing of la ilaha illallah,
by the blessing of Muhammad, the Messenger of God.*

As this example and many others in the corpus, Arabic and Arabic-derived formulas are associated with Islamic formulas that lend the text clear religious authority. Even if some expressions have been locally adapted in their pronunciation, their indexical value remains clear: they indicate that the incantation operates under Islamic legitimacy. However, the spell-caster's intentions, the commands directed at the ritual target, and the expected effects of the spell are still articulated through the vernacular code, MUK, and local interpretations regarding illness, medicine, antidotes, and so on. In this context, Arabic frames the spell and raises the ritual text into a sacred frame, but does not supplant the role of MUK.

Indonesian as a Peripheral Mediation Code

Indonesian appears in a distinctive but limited pattern within the corpus. In some incantation texts, it occurs alongside Arabic in positions otherwise occupied by MUK. Informants explain that, in such cases, Indonesian tends to appear in texts involving spirits and ghosts (ama) imagined as coming from afar, such as from Java or from the "sky," a spatial metaphor used to denote distance and abstraction. In other texts, Indonesian co-occurs with MUK and functions mainly as a narrative code. Thus, Indonesian does not appear regularly across the corpus. Even when the wording is Indonesian, its pronunciation, accent, and style of delivery remain locally inflected. This pattern may support intelligibility or provide a recognizable lexical layer, but it does not constitute a stable language of ritual authorization or efficacy. Indonesian occupies a semiotically peripheral position within the corpus.

*Burung terbang dari Jawa
Ingap di rangkang kayu bekawi
Datang tuan dari Jawa
Minta' buka' lavang kuari*

A smoother translation is as follows:

*A bird flies from Java,
perching on the branches of the bekawi tree.
A noble visitor comes from Java,
asking that the passage be opened.*

The first and third lines are closer to Indonesian, while the second and fourth shift closer to MUK. This alternation shows that Indonesian may enter the text as a narrative layer, but the ritual logic is not transferred to Indonesian in any stable manner. Instead, the vernacular remains a more grounded code for local action and ritual address.

The second example appears in Ilmu Pengampul:

*Uratku seperti kawat
Tulangku seperti bosi
Isikku pidal seperti bumi
Kulitku tebal seperti belulang
Kekuatanku seperti Saidina Ali*

A more natural translation is

*My veins are like wire,
my bones are like iron,
my flesh is dense like earth,
my skin is as tough as armor,
my strength is like that of Sayyidina Ali.*

In this example, the Indonesian wording conveys meaning more straightforwardly and descriptively than the highly figurative MUK examples. The body parts are described through Indonesian lexical forms to provide a detailed self-description. Overall, the text is formulated and presented in Indonesian; however, subtle traces of MUK are still discernible in the word *isikku*, which should be 'daging' in Indonesian. Indonesian appears in the corpus, contributing a limited descriptive layer within a system whose central hierarchy remains organized around MUK and Arabic.

Overall, the corpus of mantras collected in this study reveals a stable semiotic pattern. MUK functions as the performative core through which the efficacy of the ritual is enacted. Arabic functions as a framing and legitimizing code that sanctifies and validates the ritual. Indonesian occupies a more limited role as a narrative or mediating code, and does not appear as a ritual register. This consistency of this pattern demonstrates that the mantras within Malay society exhibit a multilingual nature. This multilingualism, often viewed as a cultural blend and a process of civilizational assimilation, reveals a structured hierarchy in which different languages are repeatedly assigned different types of authority. This constitutes the primary empirical basis for understanding ritual multilingualism among the Ulu Kapuas Malays as an organized indexical formation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that ritual multilingualism in Ulu Kapuas Malay should not be understood as free code-mixing but as a patterned distribution of semiotic labor across three languages. The key issue is not simply that MUK, Arabic, and Indonesian co-occur in the same ritual corpus, but that they recur in different structural positions and carry different types of authority. MUK consistently appears in the core of ritual action, where afflictions are named, hostile entities are addressed, and desired effects are verbally imposed. Arabic recurs most often in the opening and closing of the mantra, framing and authorizing the act. In contrast, Indonesian remains limited and largely descriptive. This distribution supports the argument that ritual multilingualism in the corpus is hierarchically organized, not eclectic, and that the hierarchy is visible in the repeated alignment between linguistic choice and ritual function ([Agha, 2006](#); [Blommaert et al., 2005](#); [Silverstein, 2003](#)).

This pattern helps clarify the performative status of MUK. In the findings, MUK is not merely the most familiar language of everyday communication; it is the language through which ritual action is actually executed. The core segments of the mantras are where commands, threats, metaphorical violence, and cosmological invocation are carried out. In that sense, MUK indexes efficacy rather than simply locality. [Silverstein's \(2003\)](#) concept of indexical order is useful here because it allows us to see how repeated ritual use elevates a linguistic form beyond referential meaning and associates it with socially recognizable force. [Agha's \(2006\)](#) notion of enregisterment extends this point by explaining how repeated textual placement and communal recognition stabilize MUK as the proper register for ritual action. The vernacular therefore becomes more than a medium of cultural proximity; it becomes the socially authorized instrument of performative efficacy.

This argument refines earlier local studies on Kapuas Hulu ritual language. Previous work has been valuable in documenting occult traditions, mantra diction, stylistic structure, and local ritual functions ([Faisal et al., 2018](#); [Hermansyah, 2010](#); [Taazimiyah et al., 2014](#)). However, these studies did not fully explain why certain linguistic resources carry a stronger semiotic force than others. The present findings suggest that ritual efficacy in Ulu Kapuas Malay does not arise from “tradition” in a general sense, but from the stabilization of MUK as the register through which ritual agency is enacted. This is also why MUK remains indispensable even when Islamic formulae are present: the vernacular is not replaced because it is the code through which action becomes locally effective. In this respect, the study contributes to a more precise account of vernacular Islamic practice by showing that local language is not only a carrier of cultural continuity, but also the performative center of ritual power ([Amin, 2014](#); [Hermansyah, 2014](#)).

Arabic occupies a different but equally important position in the ritual economy of the corpus. The findings show that Arabic and Arabic-derived expressions recur predominantly in openings and closings, where they frame the text, authorize the act, and align the ritual with an explicitly Islamic moral universe. This boundary placement is analytically significant. It indicates that Arabic is not primarily the language of performative execution in these mantras, but the language of sacral legitimation. This distinction matters because it shows that ritual authority is internally differentiated: one language performs the ritual work, while another validates it. In this way, Arabic functions as a higher-order framing index that elevates the ritual without displacing the vernacular core ([Agha, 2006](#); [Keane, 2018](#); [Silverstein, 2003](#)).

This interpretation is strengthened by the broader scholarship on language and religion. [Alsaawi \(2022\)](#) argues that multilingual religious discourse often distributes languages according to different symbolic and communicative functions, rather than treating them as equivalent codes. Recent scholarship has also shown that Islamic authority may be enacted through textual and linguistic forms whose force exceeds semantic transparency. [Nieber \(2024\)](#), for instance, demonstrates that the authority of the written Qur'an derives not only from textual content but also from the material and social possibilities through which the text mediates religious power. Similarly, [O'Sullivan \(2023\)](#) shows that Arabic may operate in multiple registers within multilingual Muslim publics, retaining a high-status theological role while coexisting with locally grounded linguistic forms. In relation to these studies, the Ulu Kapuas Malay material suggests that Arabic's authority lies not in replacing local speech but in recurrently framing it as religiously legitimate. Here, Arabic functions as a code of authorization, not as the principal medium of ritual efficacy ([Alsaawi, 2022](#); [Nieber, 2024](#); [O'Sullivan, 2023](#)).

The distinction between MUK and Arabic becomes even clearer when viewed through the lens of religious semiotic ideology. [Keane \(2018\)](#) argues that people's assumptions about what signs are and how they work shape the force attributed to religious discourse. The mantras in this corpus suggest that not all signs are expected to operate in the same way. MUK is treated as a medium capable of acting within the immediate cosmological and bodily world of ritual practice, while Arabic is treated as a medium that invokes transcendence, divine legitimacy, and sacred authority. The difference, therefore, is not simply one of origin or linguistic prestige, but of semiotic expectation. Ritual participants appear to treat vernacular lines as the place where force is enacted, and Arabic formulas as the signs that

legitimize and sacralize that enactment. This internal division of semiotic labor shows that multilingual ritual texts can embody more than one form of authority at once, each tied to a distinct ideological understanding of how language works in ritual action ([Irvine & Gal, 2000](#); [Keane, 2018](#)).

Indonesian occupies a lower and more peripheral position in this system, and this difference is theoretically revealing. Although Indonesian appears in a number of texts, it does not recur with the same regularity or authority as MUK or Arabic. It is found mainly in descriptive, narrative, or supportive segments rather than in the ritual core or the formulaic frame. This suggests that Indonesian has not undergone the same ritual enregisterment as MUK and does not carry the same translocal sacred prestige as Arabic. Its presence indexes communicative accessibility and, in some cases, a broader lexical reach, but not ritual authorization or performative force. In Gal's (2005) terms, linguistic value emerges through ideological differentiation, not through the inherent properties of language. Indonesian may be socially powerful in other domains, but within this ritual domain it remains semiotically marginal because it has not been stabilized as an authorized ritual register ([Agha, 2006](#); [Gal, 2005](#); [Irvine & Gal, 2000](#)).

This asymmetry is important because it helps move the analysis beyond generic claims about multilingualism. Recent work on the "sociolinguistics of Islam" argues that Islamic language practices need to be studied as dynamic relations between textual historicity, local language ecologies, and broader forms of semiosis ([Bhatt et al., 2025](#)). This perspective is particularly useful here. The MUK corpus shows that Islamic authority is not simply imposed through Arabic, nor is local practice reducible to cultural residue. Instead, ritual multilingualism emerges through a negotiated relation between a translocal Islamic code and a local performative code, each occupying a different but complementary position in the text. The findings therefore support the broader proposition that religious vernacularization is not merely a matter of translating Islam into local language; it also involves the semiotic ordering of languages according to different religious and cultural functions ([Bhatt et al., 2025](#)).

In this sense, the present study also refines discussions of vernacular Islam in West Kalimantan. Earlier studies have shown that Islam in the region often develops through accommodation, layering, and reinterpretation rather than through the wholesale elimination of local forms ([Amin, 2014](#); [Hermansyah, 2014](#)). Studies of Wayang tradition also show that Islamic values can be articulated through local expressive forms without erasing their cultural specificity ([Tricahyo & Nursalam, 2025](#)). The Ulu Kapuas Malay case extends this discussion by showing that the accommodation of Islam and local culture is not only thematic or ethical, but also linguistically structured through the hierarchical distribution of MUK, Arabic, and Indonesian. The current findings add a more specific linguistic dimension to this argument. They show that the coexistence of Islamic and local elements is not only doctrinal or symbolic, but also textually structured through the recurrent allocation of languages to different semiotic roles. The universality of Islam is indexed through Arabic, while the local continuity of cosmology and efficacy is grounded in MUK. What appears on the surface as multilingual can be understood as a relationship between different orders of authority.

The broader implication is that vernacular ritual discourse should not be treated as peripheral to sociolinguistic studies of religion. In contrast, such discourse offers a particularly sharp site for examining how authority is distributed across languages outside formal institutions. The Ulu Kapuas Malay material shows that global religious legitimacy and local ritual efficacy are not mutually exclusive. They are co-produced through a stable division of linguistic labor: Arabic authorizes, MUK enacts, and Indonesian mediates only marginally. This study makes both empirical and theoretical contributions. It empirically documents a corpus of inland Malay ritual discourse that remains underrepresented in the literature. Theoretically, it shows that indexical order, enregisterment, language ideology, and religious semiotic ideology are the most productive when used together to explain how different languages are differentiated within a single ritual system.

Taken together, these findings suggest that ritual multilingualism in Ulu Kapuas Malay is best understood as an organized, indexical formation. MUK indexes performative efficacy and local cosmological grounding; Arabic indexes sacred framing and religious legitimacy; and Indonesian indexes limited mediation without acquiring comparable ritual authority. These are not merely descriptive labels but positions within a structured semiotic hierarchy. Therefore, this study contributes to the scholarship on language and religion by showing that vernacular Islamic practice in peripheral settings is not an analytically marginal domain but a crucial site for understanding how linguistic resources are hierarchized, authorized, and made effective in lived religious life.

Conclusion

The Ulu Kapuas Malay incantations demonstrate a linguistic blend of Ulu Kapuas Malay (MUK), Arabic, and Indonesian. These three languages display a structured indexical hierarchy, and each linguistic form employed fulfils a distinct semiotic role. MUK functions as the performative core that serves as an index of the mantra's purpose, while Arabic legitimizes and sacralizes the ritual. Indonesian functions more restrictively and does not form the center

of the ritual register, except, on occasion, Indonesian occasionally replaces or supports local Malay in communicative segments for specific communicative purposes. By demonstrating these functions, this study contributes to socio-linguistic research within the context of language and religion, particularly in relation to vernacular Islamic practices outside formal Islamic institutions. This study is limited by its focus on a single regional corpus within the Ulu Kapuas Malay community; consequently, future research could compare it with similar forms in other Malay-speaking regions, exploring how the social environment influences vernacular Islam as reflected in the linguistic forms employed.

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