

## Multiculturalism and Identity Negotiation among the Suku Laut in Coastal Community Development Dynamics in Bintan Regency, Indonesia

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### Article History

Received: 5 April 2026;

Revised: 8 June 2026;

Accepted: 23 June 2026

### Keywords:

Multiculturalism, identity negotiation, Orang Suku Laut, multiethnic society, Kawal

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the practices of multiculturalism in the everyday lives of Orang Suku Laut (OSL), Bajo, and Bugis communities in Kawal, a coastal area inhabited by diverse ethnic groups with distinct cultural backgrounds, livelihoods, and social histories. The transition of OSL from a highly mobile maritime lifestyle to a more settled way of life has significantly influenced social relations and identity construction within this multiethnic community. This research utilized a qualitative approach, specifically employing a case study method. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with members of the OSL, Bajo, and Bugis communities, and documentary analysis. The study was informed by theories of multiculturalism and identity negotiation, particularly Fredrik Barth's concept of ethnic boundaries and Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the third space. The findings reveal that multiculturalism in Kawal is primarily manifested through everyday social interactions, economic cooperation, and the mutual adaptation of cultural values among ethnic groups. Identity negotiation emerges as a crucial strategy through which OSL maintains its cultural existence while adapting to the dynamic realities of multiethnic life.

### ABSTRAK

*Multikulturalisme dan Negosiasi Identitas pada Suku Laut dalam Dinamika Pembangunan Masyarakat Pesisir di Kabupaten Bintan, Indonesia.* Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis praktik multikulturalisme dalam kehidupan sehari-hari Orang Suku Laut (OSL), Suku Bajo, dan Suku Bugis di Kawal, wilayah pesisir yang dihuni oleh beragam kelompok etnis dengan latar belakang budaya, mata pencaharian, dan sejarah sosial yang berbeda. Perubahan pola hidup OSL dari mobilitas laut menuju kehidupan yang lebih menetap turut memengaruhi relasi sosial dan konstruksi identitas dalam masyarakat multietnis. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan masyarakat OSL, Bajo, dan Bugis, serta dokumentasi. Analisis mengacu pada teori multikulturalisme dan negosiasi identitas, terutama konsep batas-batas etnis Fredrik Barth dan ruang antara (third space) Homi K. Bhabha. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa praktik multikulturalisme di Kawal lebih banyak diwujudkan melalui interaksi sosial sehari-hari, kerja sama ekonomi, dan penyesuaian nilai budaya antar kelompok. Negosiasi identitas menjadi strategi penting bagi OSL untuk mempertahankan eksistensi budaya sekaligus beradaptasi dalam kehidupan multietnis yang dinamis.

### Kata-kata kunci:

Multikulturalisme, negosiasi identitas, Orang Suku Laut, masyarakat multietnis, Kawal.

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**How to Cite:** Elsera, M., Yahya G.Y., Oprasmani, E., Rikayana, H.L., & Gunawan D. (2026). Multiculturalism and Identity Negotiation among the Suku Laut in Coastal Community Development Dynamics in Bintan Regency, Indonesia. *Jurnal Moral Kemasyarakatan*, 11(1),1043-1054. <https://doi.org/10.21067/jmk.v11i1.14041>



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## Introduction

The sea is the natural habitat of the OSL. Their strong dependence on the sea did not only exist when they were nomadic; it is still reflected in their way of life today. The sea is the primary element that shapes the OSL's habitus. Their coping strategies are influenced by their ability to adapt to social, economic, cultural and environmental changes (Elsera et al., 2025). These changes began with the Resettlement Program for Isolated Communities (PKMT) from 1970 to 1981 and the Social Welfare Development Program for Isolated Communities (PKSMT) in 1981 (Chou, 2016). While the OSL were living a nomadic lifestyle, the sea served as a natural resource, a value system, and a source of collective identity. However, once resettled, the sea became nothing more than a natural resource. Over time, it ceased to reflect the OSL's patterns of mobility, the division of roles within their families, and their social relationships (Elsera et al., 2022).

Changes in settlement patterns, restrictions on access to marine spaces, and social and economic pressures are forcing the OSL to adapt to onshore activities. Activities that were previously centered at sea have now partially shifted to land. Similarly, social relationships built through collective work in marine spaces are being replaced by more fragmented interactions. These changes affect the sustainability of local knowledge, social solidarity, and way of life, as well as the meaning of OSL self-identity. OSL self-identity is adjusting, as evidenced by changes in cultural practices, communication patterns and OSL self-representation in public spaces (Elsera et al., 2024). This adjustment is being made to achieve social acceptance without completely abandoning OSL identity (Elsera et al., 2024). The process of adapting how ethnic identity is expressed when interacting with other groups is known as identity negotiation (Barth, 1969). It is an adaptation strategy employed by OSLs in response to power relations, dominant norms, and demands for social acceptance, enabling them to maintain their cultural identity while achieving social acceptance.

Identity negotiations take place within the context of multi-ethnic social life between the OSL and several other ethnic groups. One such settlement is Kawal Village in the Gunung Kijang subdistrict of the Bintan regency in the Riau Islands province, where the OSL have coexisted with other ethnic groups since the 1970s. The OSL living in Kawal share their social space with the Bajo, Bugis, and Malay ethnic groups. The presence of different ethnic groups within the same social space can foster both associative and dissociative dynamics. Interactions based on tolerance, cooperation, and cross-cultural adaptation lead to an associative way of life, whereas interactions rooted in disparities, inequality, and discrimination result in a dissociative way of life. Coexistence in coastal regions reflects cultural diversity and serves as a social arena where identities, interests, and power relations are negotiated.

The Kawal neighborhood, home to several ethnic groups living side by side in the same coastal area, has fostered a distinctive form of multiculturalism. The multiculturalism referred to in this paper is 'everyday multiculturalism'. It is not just cultural diversity but also the social positions of different ethnic groups that shape of they live together in the same coastal area while simultaneously facing the challenges of inequality and marginalization. Significant

acceptance, adaptation, and identity negotiation characterize the integration process between the OSL and other ethnic groups in Kawal.

The coexistence of these maritime ethnic groups reflects cultural diversity and reveals the negotiation of identity, the subtle power dynamics of everyday interactions, and the processes of adaptation. Rather than existing as an institutionalized normative concept, multiculturalism in Kawa manifests in concrete social practices that shape patterns of cooperation, tolerance, and inequality. Researching these practices is essential to understanding the social position of the OSL community and the resulting multiethnic structure. In light of these dynamics, it is crucial to conduct research on multiculturalism practices and OSL identity negotiations within the context of coastal community development. Based on the background outlined above, this study aims to examine these practices and negotiations within the context of coastal community development in Bintan Regency.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-interpretive research design. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the manifestations of multiculturalism in the daily lives of the OSL alongside other ethnic groups, such as the Bajo, Bugis, and Malay peoples, in Kawal Village. Such practices can only be measured qualitatively, as they necessitate an appreciation of meanings, experiences, and social interactions among individuals and between ethnic groups (Blumer, 1969). The study was conducted in Kawal Village, Gunung Kijang subdistrict, Bintan regency, Riau Islands province, from 1 to 3 August 2025. This location was chosen because it is home to a multi-ethnic population living alongside two OSL members, including two Bajo, two Bugis, and two Malay members, creating a setting for intense social, economic, and cultural interaction. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: they are members of the OSL, Bajo, Bugis, or Malay communities; they are at least 40 years old; they have resided in Kawal for at least five years; they are active in social life and interact with the local community; they represent a variety of ages and genders; they are fishermen or residents who actively engage in cross-ethnic interactions; and they serve as neighbourhood unit (RT) officials.

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation—direct observation involved observing the daily lives of the OSL community to identify naturally occurring practices of multiculturalism. In-depth interviews explored the OSL community's experiences, perspectives and adaptation strategies with the Bajo, Bugis and Malay ethnic groups, including identity negotiation processes and established relationships. Documentation involved collecting administrative data from neighborhood units (RTs), policy archives related to coastal communities, and field notes to support the research analysis. Data analysis was conducted through the stages of data reduction, presentation, and conclusion-drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1992). During the data reduction stage, the researcher grouped the interview, observation, and documentation results related to multiculturalism practices and OSL identity negotiations. These were then presented in narrative form, highlighting the main themes of economic cooperation, identity negotiation, and social capital. Next, the conclusions were verified by identifying patterns of relationships among the themes. The evaluation process

involved triangulating sources, techniques, and time to ensure the validity and consistency of the research findings.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. The economic context of the sea-dependent Kawal region

The OSL, Bajo Bugis, and Malay communities in the Kawal region are the result of a long history of maritime migration in the Riau Islands. Since the era of the Riau Malay Sultanate, the OSL have lived a nomadic existence in the waters of the Strait of Malacca, historically serving as guardians of the sea lanes and gatherers of marine resources (Arman, 2017). The OSL in Kawal have inhabited the coastal area for decades. According to Nek Kancil, who is 80 years old, she was born when her parents were still living in Kajang. At that time, she and her parents were living a nomadic life on a 24-foot Kajang boat. After she grew older, she lived in Telom (Air Kelubi) for a time. Nek Kancil's family home in Telom was in a garden. However, as it was difficult to find fish there, her family moved from Telom to Kawal Laut. Nek Kancil acknowledged that the OSL family depends on the sea. They returned to living at sea for less than a year.

They once again roamed the waters of Bintan before finally settling in Kawal Laut, having found a spot sheltered from strong winds. Kawal Laut, where the family has lived to this day, is close enough to the mainland to provide shelter from strong winds. In addition, they can catch plenty of fish there, which was a strong reason for them to settle there. As they felt safe and at home there, they built a house on the water, which they call a 'rumah cacak'. Here is a photo of the OSL Kawal Laut' rumah cacak'.



Source: Marisa Elsera's documentation, August 2025

**Figure 1** OSL Cacak House: Guarding the Sea

The Nek Kancil family was the first to settle in Kawal Laut. Later, he invited his two siblings to live nearby. It was only then that the OSL people began to move there, one by one. Meanwhile, the Bajo and Bugis people have been present in Kawal since the 1990s. Initially, the Bajo built only three houses in Kawal, and their fellow villagers gradually followed suit, eventually settling there as well. The OSL, Bajo, Bugis, and Malay communities are all located in the same subdistrict: Kawal Subdistrict. Geographically, however, they are separated by the

sea. The OSL are concentrated along the coast, while the Bajo and Bugis are concentrated inland. These settlements are sociologically known as 'ethnic enclaves', referring to residential areas predominantly inhabited by a specific ethnic group characterized by shared language, culture, social networks and economic activities that are relatively concentrated within that group.

The settlements of the OSL, Bajo, Bugis, and Malay peoples, which tend to form ethnic enclaves, share one common feature: they all live in stilt houses built in coastal areas. These elevated structures are built on wooden posts in shallow waters along the shoreline. This type of settlement is an ecological adaptation to the marine environment and also embodies cultural identity and a maritime way of life. The fact that all three ethnic groups live in stilt houses demonstrates that they regard the sea as their primary living, social, and economic space. The coastal economic activities of these groups are centered on fishing, trading marine products, and providing maritime transportation services. The OSL and Bajo communities are predominantly traditional fishermen, whereas the Bugis, Malay, and Chinese communities are predominantly traders and investors.

I Although there are still boundaries of ethnic identity, they are still negotiated in daily life; the intensity of interaction between groups is high due to economic interdependence, patron-client relationships, intermarriage, and cooperation in fishing. The OSL, Bajo, and Bugis communities in Kawal Laut interact through pragmatic and complementary patterns of cooperation. The OSL and Bajo communities are generally directly involved in fishing, drawing on their local knowledge of sea conditions, seasons, and fishing grounds. Meanwhile, the Bugis play a greater role in the seafood trade network, acting as collectors, intermediaries, or liaisons to broader markets. This division of roles is flexible and open to negotiation based on economic needs and the social relationships established among the groups.

All of the communities in Kawal Village rely on the sea as their primary source of livelihood. However, there are several significant differences between these ethnic groups, particularly regarding fishing gear and methods. The following outlines the differences in fishing methods and gear used by the OSL, Bajo, Bugis, and Malay ethnic groups:

a. The Sea Nomads

The Sea Nomads rely entirely on marine resources for their livelihood. Their dependence on the sea dates back to long before they settled in one place. As nomads of the sea, they possess extensive local knowledge of the ocean. They regard the sea as their living space. They use natural, non-mechanical methods for fishing. They use simple equipment such as handlines, cast nets, natural traps and spears (Elsera et al., 2025). Their fishing practices focus more on subsistence than commercial fishing. The OSL's local knowledge of the sea enables it to catch fish effectively. Their ability to dive and understand ocean currents is a crucial part of their fishing strategy as seafarers.

b. The Bajo

The Bajo people are renowned for their seafaring skills. They are also renowned for their exceptional diving skills. These skills are preserved not only for economic reasons but also to construct a cultural identity passed down from generation to generation. From an early age, Bajo children are introduced to the sea, enabling them to develop the physiological and

psychological adaptations necessary for prolonged diving activities. These skills enable the Bajo to access ecological areas that are difficult for fishermen from other ethnic groups to reach, such as the seafloor and coral reefs. Like the Osl, they share a history of nomadic life. However, the Bajo use fishing gear such as fish aggregating devices (FADs), tabere fishing rods, fish spears, nets, traps, and diving compressors, as well as lepa boats for diving. They excel at catching reef fish, sea cucumbers, and other bottom-dwelling marine life.

c. Bugis

The Bugis are well-established seafarers and fishermen. Their seafaring traditions are relatively more modern than those of the OSL and Bajo ethnic groups. Their fishing gear includes trawls, boat-mounted bagan nets, large-scale longlines, gillnets, and drift nets operated from boats. Unlike the OSL and Bajo, the Bugis are more market- and trade-oriented and often possess capital and distribution networks.

d. Malay

Malay fishermen typically use a combination of traditional and semi-modern fishing methods. They fish in coastal waters and estuaries. They have their own fishing traditions, often associated with technologies such as the bubu trap. A bubu is a traditional fish trap made of bamboo or rattan, used in shallow or coastal waters. It is designed so that fish can enter but cannot escape. Using bubus reflects the local Malay community's ecological knowledge and traditional wisdom for environmentally friendly fishing. Malay fishermen are sedentary and integrated into the land-based economy.

Multicultural practices among the OSL, Bajo, Bugis, and Malay communities in Kawal Village are evident in various forms of social interaction. These forms of multiculturalism are evident in economic cooperation, participation in community activities, the shared use of social spaces, and mutual respect for the values, customs, and traditions of each ethnic group. Interethnic social relations unfold through adaptive mechanisms, particularly in fishing, the marine product trade, and the fulfillment of basic needs. These ongoing interactions foster harmonious social relations, even as each ethnic group maintains its cultural identity and ethnic boundaries. In Kawal Village, diversity is not viewed as a source of conflict but as part of a social reality managed through communication, tolerance, and sustained cooperation. The following are examples of multiculturalism in Kawal Village:

1) Division of roles and cross-ethnic social relations

In a multicultural society, the division of cross-ethnic social roles is generally shaped by historical interactions, economic structures, and power relations that have developed within the OSL, Bajo, Bugis, and Malay communities. From a multiculturalist perspective, the recognition and division of these roles becomes problematic when cultural differences are not treated equally ([Taylor, 1994](#)). In Kawal, cross-ethnic neighborly relations not only reflect social interactions in coastal areas but also serve as an arena for negotiation, recognition, bargaining power, and equality in daily multicultural life. The division of roles among the OSL, Bajo, Bugis, and Malay communities tends to be more associative. OSL, Bajo, and Bugis fishermen sometimes interact by borrowing fishing equipment from one another, sharing information on fishing grounds, attending rewang and hajatan celebrations, and participating in community

service activities. These interactions create a fluid and cooperative social space. However, such a social space does not arise naturally but is shaped through historical processes of migration, maritime economic structures, and power relations that govern access to resources.

From a multicultural perspective, harmonious interethnic relations are a reflection of social coexistence. Practices such as lending fishing equipment, sharing information about fishing grounds, and participating in rewang ceremonies demonstrate recognition of other groups as members of the same community. This aligns with Taylor's (1994) thinking that recognition is an essential prerequisite for creating an equitable multicultural society. In Kawal Village, differences in ethnic identity do not hinder the formation of everyday social relationships, as each group is allowed to interact and participate.

Problems typically arise from the division of roles in patron-client relationships between OSL, Bajo, and Bugis fishermen and tauke. These relationships have the potential to reproduce symbolic and material inequalities. The relationships formed between the tauke and the fishermen involve not only economic gains but also power and social recognition. As financiers and controllers of market access, the tauke hold greater bargaining power in determining prices, debt systems, and the distribution of fishing gear. Meanwhile, Bajo and Bugis fishermen, who interact more frequently with the tauke, are more vulnerable due to their dependence on capital and on the guaranteed purchase of their catch. This inequality is evident in the disproportionate distribution of profits, debt traps, and dependency. Consequently, relationships that were once based on mutual need have evolved into a structure that tends to perpetuate the dominance of one party, thereby reinforcing social stratification within multi-ethnic coastal communities.

The patron-client relationship between fishermen and tauke shows signs of structural dependence (Midgley, 2020). The tauke control the capital, marketing networks, and distribution of fishing gear, leaving the fishermen in a dependent position. This dependence is economic and social: the continuity of fishing activities often depends on financial support from the tauke. This relationship reflects structural poverty, whereby social structures limit the access of OSL, Bajo, and Bugis fishermen to economic resources. While OSL, Bajo, and Bugis fishermen remain productive, their position in the fisheries economic chain results in them receiving relatively small profits compared to capital owners. This leads to an unequal distribution of prosperity.

The patron-client relationship is not considered balanced (Ritzer & Goodman, 2017). Tauke control economic resources, enabling them to determine catch prices, debt mechanisms, and market access. These conditions create a relationship of domination over fishermen within the local economic system. The tauke's position is supported by economic and social capital in the form of trade networks, as well as symbolic capital in the form of higher social status within the community. This accumulation of capital gives the tauke greater bargaining power than the fishermen, thereby perpetuating long-term social inequality.

## 2) Forms of cooperation and social solidarity

Interethnic cooperation can be observed in the fulfillment of practical needs, such as economic activities and community safety. Solidarity is not based on shared identity, but rather on shared life experiences and interdependence between groups. Cooperation shows that ethnic differences do not necessarily hinder social interaction but can instead be part of productive

social dynamics. Sustainable social solidarity among ethnic groups requires equitable relationships in which the contributions, identity, and social rights of each ethnic group are recognized within communal life.

### 3) Managing differences in values, customs, and traditions

Multiethnic communities, such as Kawal Village, have differences in values, customs, and traditions. While this social reality fosters cooperation, it can also create tension if not managed through dialogue. These differences are managed by instilling an attitude of tolerance and recognition of the legitimacy of other groups' values and traditions. The key to interethnic harmony lies in a tolerant way of life and a system of values based on equality, without forcing any group to conform in a way that could erode their cultural identity. Wise management of differences requires striking a balance between social cohesion and respect for cultural diversity.

### 4) Multiculturalism as a social practice rather than a formal policy

In Kawal Village, multiculturalism is more evident as a social practice embedded in daily interactions than as a formal state policy. The values of multiculturalism are embodied in customs of mutual respect, the shared use of common spaces, and the informal recognition of other groups' customs and traditions. These practices emerge organically from the experience of living together rather than from written regulations. Nevertheless, formal policy support for multiculturalism is necessary to ensure that minority groups do not face discrimination or lose their rights. Such policies also safeguard diversity in daily life.

## 2. Identity Negotiation in a Multiethnic Society

### a. Changes in OSL Identity in the Context of Coexistence

Changes in OSL identity are inextricably linked to the process of coexisting with other ethnic groups, such as the Bajo, Bugis, and Malay. Intense economic, social, and cultural interactions have prompted the OSL to adapt its way of life, values, and social practices. The shift from a way of life that was heavily dependent on maritime mobility towards a more settled existence has influenced how the OSL perceive themselves as seafaring people. Their identity is now defined not only by an exclusive relationship with the sea but also by social relationships with other ethnic groups in their vicinity. However, these changes in social relationships do not simply erase the OSL's identity; rather, they shape a more dynamic, contextualized identity. The multiethnic life led by the OSL results in a dynamic identity shaped by the selective retention of certain cultural elements and the adaptation of others to new social conditions. The OSL's identity is the result of balancing old traditions with the demands of coexistence, creating a more fluid and adaptive identity that does not completely lose its distinctive characteristics as a seafaring people.

### b. Identity negotiation strategies in social interaction

OSL employs identity negotiation strategies to promote harmony in interethnic relations. These strategies are evident in how the OSL adapts its language, attitudes, and behavioral norms across different situations. According to identity negotiation theory, individuals seek social acceptance by adjusting how they present their identity in specific situations (Wiggins, 2017). OSL's ability to adapt allows it to be accepted within cross-ethnic social and economic networks without emphasizing identity differences that could

potentially cause tension. When interacting with non-OSL members, they typically emphasize their identities as fishermen, coastal community members, or villagers, rather than highlighting their ethnic identity. This demonstrates that identity is contextual and used strategically according to social needs (Stets & Serpe, 2013).

OSL also negotiates identity through pragmatic social practices, such as economic cooperation and neighborly relations. While ethnic identity is not always explicitly displayed, it is often downplayed for the sake of the common good. According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, which views identity as the result of social interaction (Carter & Fuller, 2015), identity is not static but is negotiated according to social needs. Identity is the outcome of an ongoing social process of construction and verification through interaction (Bombak, 2014).

c. Flexible Ethnic Boundaries

Life in the multiethnic community of Kawal Laut shows that the ethnic boundaries between the OSL, Bajo, Bugis, and Malay are fluid rather than rigid. As Fredrik Barth (1969) explains, ethnic boundaries are not solely determined by cultural differences but by the social processes that govern interactions between groups. While ethnic boundaries remain as markers of identity, they do not serve as major barriers in social and economic life. This fluidity is evident in cross-ethnic cooperation, intermarriage, and routine social interactions. Ethnic identity functions more as a social reference point than as a divider. Rather than being pitted against one another, ethnic differences are understood as part of a social reality that is continuously negotiated in a multiethnic context. Among the Sea Nomads, ethnic boundaries are maintained through the collective identity of the community, kinship networks, local maritime knowledge, and cultural practices passed down through the generations. However, these boundaries are not closed or rigid, and there is an ongoing process of negotiation in the daily interactions between the Malay, Bugis, and Bajo groups, particularly about seafaring, trade, and communal living. While preserving their maritime identity, the Sea Nomads also adopt cultural elements from other groups to adapt to social changes and the demands of development. OSL ethnicity does not disappear as a result of interethnic interaction; rather, it is reproduced and renegotiated. Despite the high intensity of interactions with other ethnic groups, OSL identity in Kawal Village has endured.

d. The 'third space' in interethnic relations

OSL primarily uses Malay when communicating with the Bugis and Bajo ethnic groups. However, within their own group, OSL retains distinctive terms related to maritime life. Consequently, a blend of various cultural elements has emerged. The language and culture of the OSL are no longer purely original or purely Malay. Instead, they have become a new space that enables different groups to interact and develop a shared identity. Similarly, the knowledge employed is not solely that of the OSL, but has been shaped by the blending of experiences and knowledge from various groups. This cooperative space serves as a 'third space' in which the identity of the coastal community is expressed more prominently. This situation illustrates how a minority group's identity can be formed through processes of hybridization and intercultural social spaces (Belgrade et al., 2022).

The relationships between the OSL, the Bajo, the Bugis and the Malay people in Kawal Laut also constitute what Homi K. Bhabha (cited in [Bhandari, 2022](#)) refers to as a 'third space' or an 'interstitial space'. This is a social domain where cultural encounters occur that do not belong entirely to any one ethnic group. In the 'third space', identity is not singular but rather hybrid, formed through continuous interaction.

The existence of this space enables the multi-ethnic community in Kawal Laut to develop new social practices that transcend traditional ethnic boundaries. The values, customs and ways of life that develop within this space are the result of cultural blending and adaptation. Thus, the third space is a vital arena for multiculturalism in daily life, where differences are transformed into the foundation for relatively harmonious coexistence rather than being erased.

### 3. Dynamics of Coastal Community Development in Bintan Regency

The development of industry in Bintan Regency has driven socioeconomic transformation among coastal communities. This has led the Sea Nomads to adopt a variety of jobs and economic activities. From a development perspective, these changes are seen as a consequence of modernization, shifting traditional economic patterns towards market integration. Social development is defined as the process of linking economic growth with the enhancement of a community's social capacity ([Midgley, 2020](#)).

This transformation arises from the increasing interaction between the Sea Nomads and other ethnic groups. Socioeconomic transformation is inextricably linked to infrastructure development, such as the construction of public facilities and the establishment of industries, which alters long-standing patterns of coastal land use integral to the lives of the Sea Nomads. Changes to their living spaces encourage them to adapt to new environmental conditions, while also expanding their social ties with newcomers and other ethnic groups involved in development activities ([Soetomo, 2013](#)).

Coastal development has transformed the lives of the Sea Nomads, shifting them from a homogeneous existence to one more integrated into a diverse social environment. This has led to increasingly frequent interactions between groups in daily life. The increase in interactions between ethnic groups has fostered social integration through economic cooperation, community involvement, and the formation of social bonds. These interactions lay the groundwork for multiculturalism to flourish in Bintan's coastal communities.

However, development can also pose challenges to the sustainability of the Sea Nomads' cultural identity. The intensity of relationships with other ethnic groups, changes in livelihoods, and the demands of adapting to modern life all drive identity adjustments. The Sea Nomads strive to negotiate their cultural identity by preserving traditional values while adapting to social changes brought about by development ([Jentoft, 2005](#)). This process shows that cultural identity is not fixed, but negotiated within the dynamics of coastal community development.

### Conclusion

The Kawal coastal community's practice of multiculturalism has taken shape through social relationships that enable the OSL, Bajo, Bugis, and Malay communities to cooperate and live together, despite their cultural differences and unequal socio-economic positions. This study

finds that, while coastal development brings social change and economic opportunities, it also creates inequalities in access to resources, placing the OSL in a vulnerable position, and in these circumstances, negotiating multi-ethnic identities and social capital functions as an adaptive mechanism, enabling ethnic groups to maintain their cultural identities while expanding their access to social and economic resources. This research is novel in that it develops a perspective that views multiculturalism in coastal communities not merely as a form of diversity management and social cohesion, but also as a socio-economic strategy shaping how marginalized groups cope with poverty, vulnerability, and development inequalities. These findings enrich the field of development sociology by demonstrating the interrelationship between multiculturalism, social capital, and structures of inequality in coastal communities. They also highlight the importance of development oriented not only towards economic growth, but also towards strengthening social capacity and ensuring more equitable access for vulnerable groups.

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