

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY OF VULNERABLE GROUP: TRACING THE ORIGINS OF THE TOBELO DALAM TRIBE FROM A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Adi F. Mahmud^{1*}, M. Nasir Tamalene²,

¹Peneliti Bahasa Universitas Muhammadiyah Maluku Utara, Ternate, Indonesia

²Peneliti Ethnobiology Universitas Khairun Ternate, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Adi F. Mahmud E-mail: adifadelmahmud@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 08-05-2025 Revised: 08-06-2025 Accepted: 12-06-2025 Published: 15-06-2025 Volume: 9 Issue: 2 DOI: https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v9i2.455	This study examines the complex relationship between language and identity within the Tobelo Dalam tribe, a semi-nomadic and socially marginalized community in North Halmahera, Indonesia. This research uses qualitative content analysis of ethnographic and linguistic literature to trace the beginnings of the Tobelo Dalam language and investigate its divergence from standard Tobelo. Essential findings indicate notable phonological, morphological, and syntactic differences alongside preserved archaic Austronesian vocabulary, implying linguistic independence influenced by ecological seclusion and oral customs. Concurrently, common grammatical characteristics and ethnobotanical lexicon corroborate cultural and linguistic continuity. These dynamics underscore a dual process of distinction and convergence that defines the group's evolving identity. The research determines that Tobelo Dalam should be considered a unique language and cultural entity. It promotes the immediate implementation of micro-level documentation and inclusive language policies that honour Indigenous self-determination. The results enhance discussions on language endangerment, cultural resilience, and the necessity for decolonial approaches in linguistic anthropology.
KEYWORDS Language and identity, Vulnerable Group, Tobelo Dalam Tribe, Linguistics	

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental component of human identity, culture, and community. It is both a communication medium and a reservoir of communal memory, cultural expressions, and traditional knowledge (Li, 2020; Noletto & Lopes, 2020; Okeogu, 2017). For numerous indigenous tribes globally, language transcends a mere set of signs; it encapsulates their worldview, values, and historical narrative (Saliman et al., 2021). The forces of globalization, modernity, and sociopolitical marginalization have jeopardized many indigenous languages and their associated identities, pushing them toward extinction (Dorian, 1981; Rojas, 2020; Varennes & Kuzborska, 2016). Linguistic and cultural vulnerability is notably evident in groups isolated or underrepresented in the national discourse, leading to insufficient recognition, protection, and academic focus (Agoos, 2020; Scanlon & Singh, 2006).

The Tobelo Dalam tribe, or Forest Tobelo, is a semi-nomadic society inhabiting the interior forest areas of Halmahera Island in North Maluku, Indonesia. Notwithstanding the tribe's



distinctive cultural and linguistic traits, the Tobelo Dalam remains one of the least recorded and most socially vulnerable populations in eastern Indonesia. The language identity of the Tobelo Dalam is closely associated with their historical, migratory, and social experiences (Platenkamp, 2019; Taylor, 2025). Their language, although possessing similarities with the predominant Tobelo language, demonstrates unique phonological, lexical, and syntactic characteristics, indicating a sophisticated linguistic development influenced by isolation, mobility, and interactions with adjacent communities (Asteria et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2019). However, a significant portion of the knowledge regarding their language is still anecdotal, unrecorded, and insufficiently conceptualized.

Previous ethnographic and anthropological research concerning the Tobelo Dalam has predominantly concentrated on their material culture, migratory practices, and peripheral position within the larger Tobelo society (Duncan, 2009; Platenkamp, 2007, 2019; Putri et al., 2019; Taylor, 2025; *The Folk Biology of the Tobelo People*, 2013). When conducted, linguistics studies generally regarded the language as a dialectal derivative of Tobelo, neglecting a comprehensive examination of its structural distinctiveness, historical development, or implications for identity. The minimal consideration of language, crucial to cultural identity for vulnerable groups, constitutes a notable oversight.

An extensive linguistic examination of the Tobelo Dalam community addresses a scholarly gap and bolsters initiatives for the recording, reviving, and preserving of indigenous languages. Although there is an expanding corpus of literature on endangered languages and linguistic variety in Indonesia, research, especially examining the relationship between language and identity among extremely marginalized and semi-isolated communities, such as the Tobelo Dalam, is few. Current linguistic assessments frequently neglect the sociolinguistic and historical factors that influence the development of linguistic variation among indigenous communities. Platenkamp (2019); Samorai (2020). Moreover, there is an absence of diachronic and comparative methodologies that examine the origins and evolution of the Tobelo Dalam language, other Tobelo-speaking communities and other Austronesian languages in the area.

A significant deficiency exists in the restricted use of linguistic anthropology to comprehend how the Tobelo Dalam conceptualize their identity through language, narrative, naming conventions, and intergenerational transmission. There is inadequate consideration of the external pressures—such as coerced settlement, cultural assimilation, and governmental neglect—that influence this community's linguistic practices and identity development. The result is an academic oversight and a lost chance to engage in critical discussions regarding language endangerment, Indigenous rights, and cultural resilience. This study aims to provide a unique perspective by combining linguistic, anthropological, and historical approaches to investigate the origins and identity expressions of the Tobelo Dalam tribe. This research puts the Tobelo Dalam language as a fundamental axis of cultural distinctiveness, persistence, and transformation, in contrast to prior studies that regard it as a component of the greater Tobelo ethnicity. This study tries to reveal patterns indicating historical divergence and social difference by examining the structural characteristics of speech, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon.

The main goal of this research initiative is to investigate the correlation between language and identity within the Tobelo Dalam tribe through an extensive linguistic analysis grounded on ethnographic study. The primary aim is to investigate the origins of the Tobelo Dalam tribe by



analyzing its divergence and convergence with associated languages and anthropological elements within the Tobelo language groups of Halmahera.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction to Language and Identity

Language is a crucial indicator of identity, influencing and mirroring its speakers' cultural and social contexts. Kramsch (1998) asserts that language transcends basic communication, serving as a conduit for individuals to articulate their cultural affinities and social identities. This viewpoint emphasizes the fundamental connection between language and identity, especially in indigenous and oppressed populations. Within Indigenous communities, language encapsulates shared experiences, customs, and perspectives. The decline of indigenous languages frequently results in a corresponding loss of cultural identity and heritage. UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* underscores the pace at which indigenous languages vanish, highlighting the critical necessity for documentation and revival initiatives (UNESCO, 2011).

The Tobelo Dalam tribe of North Halmahera, Indonesia, illustrates the complex connection between language and identity. Their linguistic practices are intricately connected to their cultural traditions and social structures as a semi-nomadic indigenous tribe. Nevertheless, insufficient academic focus has been directed towards their distinct linguistic identity, underscoring the need for thorough research to record and comprehend their language within its cultural framework. Examining linguistic identity includes diverse theoretical frameworks investigating how language serves as a symbol of social affiliation and distinction. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) present identity as an emerging characteristic of linguistic interaction, highlighting its dynamic and context-dependent essence in identity development. This method emphasizes the function of language in shaping and negotiating identities within specific social and cultural settings.

Language ideologies, which are beliefs and perceptions on the significance of language in social existence, clarify the relationship between language and identity. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) contend that language ideologies affect the perception and valuation of linguistic practices, consequently establishing group identities and social hierarchies. In Indigenous communities, prevailing linguistic ideologies can devalue native languages, resulting in language shifts and the erosion of identity. Analyzing language ideologies within the Tobelo Dalam tribe reveals the impact of greater social and political influences on their linguistic practices. Comprehending these concepts is essential for formulating practical language preservation and revitalization methods that honour and strengthen the community's cultural identity.

2.2. Linguistic Anthropology and Indigenous Communities

Linguistic anthropology provides an extensive framework for analyzing the interaction of language, culture, and society, especially in indigenous populations. This field underscores the significance of comprehending language as a cultural practice that both influences and is influenced by social structures and cultural norms (Duranti, 1997). Linguistic anthropology has played a crucial role in indigenous environments by documenting endangered languages and examining how linguistic activities mirror and strengthen cultural identities. Research indicates that language loss frequently connects with the decline of cultural knowledge and practices, highlighting the necessity for comprehensive language preservation strategies considering cultural, social, and political elements (Harrison, 2007). Linguistic anthropology offers the Tobelo Dalam



tribe a framework to examine how their language embodies their distinct cultural experiences and social structure. Using ethnographic methodologies, researchers can acquire profound insights into the community's linguistic practices, beliefs, and values, thus enhancing language preservation initiatives' efficacy and cultural sensitivity.

2.3. Historical and Comparative Linguistics in Austronesian Contexts

The Austronesian language family, with more than 1,200 languages, constitutes one of the largest and most diverse linguistic groups globally. Historical and comparative linguistics have been essential in elucidating the evolution and connections among these languages, offering insights into human migratory patterns and cultural interactions across the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Blust, 2009). The Tobelo language, utilized by the Tobelo Dalam tribe in North Halmahera, belongs to the North Halmahera language group and is characterized by distinctive traits that set it apart from other Austronesian languages. Voorhoeve (1988) and Holton (2010) conducted comparative studies that underscore the linguistic diversity in this region, indicating the necessity for additional research to comprehend the historical processes and interrelations among these languages. Examining the Tobelo Dalam language from historical and comparative perspectives can reveal linguistic evolution and contact patterns, elucidating the tribe's past relationships and migrations. These studies are crucial for reconstructing the linguistic and cultural history of the region, enhancing broader insights into Austronesian language evolution.

2.4. Ethnolinguistic and Oral Tradition Studies

Ethnolinguistics examines the interplay between language and culture, analyzing how linguistic practices reflect and influence cultural identities and perspectives. Oral traditions, integral to numerous indigenous societies, function as repositories of cultural memory, history, and values conveyed throughout generations through storytelling, ceremonies, and other verbal arts (Finnegan, 1992). In the Tobelo Dalam tribe, oral traditions are essential for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge and social norms. Documenting and evaluating these traditions can yield significant insights into the community's linguistic frameworks, metaphors, and semantic domains, elucidating the role of language as a cultural resource (Foley, 1997).

Moreover, comprehending the interaction between language and oral traditions helps enhance language revitalization initiatives by pinpointing culturally meaningful narratives and expressions that resonate with community members. Integrating these components into language instruction and preservation efforts can augment their efficacy and cultural significance.

2.5. The Tobelo Dalam Tribe: Sociolinguistic and Anthropological Overview

The Tobelo Dalam tribe, located in the forested interiors of North Halmahera, Indonesia, exemplifies a semi-nomadic indigenous society whose cultural and linguistic traditions are deeply intertwined with their ecological environment. Taylor (1993) observes that their profound connection with the forest transcends practical purposes, serving a symbolic function that informs a cosmology wherein language encapsulates environmental knowledge, social structure, and ancestral memory. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the Tobelo Dalam display demonstrates characteristics of what Fishman (1991) calls "diglossia and ethnolinguistic vitality," in which their local linguistic repertoire remains in tension with prevailing national and regional languages. This interaction has resulted in code-switching, borrowing, and language shifts among younger generations, illustrating the influences of marginalization and assimilation. Nonetheless, their



language continues to be a crucial indicator of group identity, functioning as both a demarcation and a connection within the wider Tobelo-speaking communities.

Anthropologically, the Tobelo Dalam exemplify the traits of what Scott (2009) designates as “non-state peoples”—entities that intentionally preserve social and spatial autonomy to resist integration into state-centric institutions. Their language uniqueness serves as both a symbol and a method of resistance, fostering a “grammar of autonomy” (Graeber, 2004), in which identity is affirmed through linguistic practices that maintain oral histories, family systems, and ritual knowledge. Furthermore, the Tobelo Dalam example necessitates a reevaluation of ethnolinguistic borders. Although frequently classified as a dialectal variant of mainstream Tobelo, initial lexical and phonological analyses indicate the potential for a divergent linguistic lineage—what Himmelmann (2007) refers to as “underdifferentiated languages,” meaning varieties presumed to be dialects due to insufficient documentation but which may be recognized as separate languages. The tribe's language marginalization reflects their socio-political obscurity. Kulick (1992) contends that language change frequently indicates underlying inequality and cultural devaluation, prompting critical inquiries on the rights to linguistic self-determination. The absence of governmental assistance for documentation, acknowledgement, or educational integration of their language intensifies this vulnerability. Therefore, a thorough sociolinguistic and anthropological examination of the Tobelo Dalam must consider various overlapping dimensions: linguistic structure and usage, identity politics, spatial movement, ecological context, and power dynamics. It also requires a participative, decolonial practice that prioritizes the voices and epistemologies of the Tobelo Dalam.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative content analysis of literature to examine the relationship between language and identity within the Tobelo Dalam tribe. Qualitative content analysis is a methodologically rigorous and systematic strategy for evaluating textual material by classifying and thematically analyzing patterns and meanings (Moretti et al., 2011; Whitaker, 2011). This research employs the approach of a corpus comprising scholarly articles, ethnographic reports, linguistic studies, and pertinent grey literature that elucidate the linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic realities of the Tobelo Dalam and analogous indigenous people.

The data collection procedures are as follows: (1) Formulation of Research Questions: This study, grounded in the theoretical framework, aims to trace the origins of the Tobelo Dalam tribe by analyzing its divergence and convergence with related languages within the Tobelo language family in Halmahera. Corpus Selection: Academic publications, ethnographies, field reports, and language documentation studies about Tobelo, North Halmahera, and Austronesian-speaking communities were identified through digital databases (e.g., JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar). Data Extraction: Textual excerpts pertinent to linguistic structure, identity discourse, language ideology, and sociopolitical context were chosen for examination. Category Development: Utilizing Mayring's (2014) framework, deductive and inductive categories were established based on theoretical constructs, including language divergence, cultural identity, and marginalization. Theme coding and analysis involved categorizing data and interpreting theme patterns for research. Synthesis and Interpretation: Findings were synthesized to comprehend the interaction between language and identity, with implications for language preservation and policy.



4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Findings

Linguistic Characteristics of Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Language

The Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo languages display unique linguistic features that signify their cultural and historical backgrounds. Both languages are part of the North Halmaheran language family, which is genetically affiliated with West Papuan languages rather than Austronesian languages. This classification affects their phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. The following are the principal linguistic traits that differentiate the Tobelo Dalam language from the Tobelo language. This comparison relies on existing work emphasizing phonological, morphological, lexical, and sociolinguistic distinctions. According to recent linguistic and ethnographic findings, Tobelo Dalam exhibits significant divergence, sometimes classified as a dialect (Taylor, 1990; Holton, 2010; Voorhoeve, 1988; Kulikov, n.d).

Table 1: Linguistic Characteristics of Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Language

Linguistic Feature	Tobelo Dalam	Tobelo Language
Phonology	Frequent glottal stops, reduced vowel inventory	Broader vowel distinctions, fewer glottal stops
Morphology	More analytic constructions, simplified verb morphology	Richer inflectional morphology
Lexicon	Contains archaic Austronesian roots and forest-specific terminology	Standardized lexicon influenced by regional lingua franca
Syntax	More variable word order, pragmatic emphasis	Relatively fixed SVO word order
Language Use	Restricted to intra-group communication, oral transmission only	Used in education and religious settings, some literacy

The language comparison in Table 1 highlights significant structural differences between Tobelo Dalam and normal Tobelo, supporting the assertion that Tobelo Dalam should be regarded as more than merely a dialectal variety. Tobelo Dalam exhibits many glottal stops and a limited vowel inventory, potentially indicative of phonetic economy arising from extended oral transmission and ecological seclusion. The language prefers analytic formations and demonstrates simpler verb morphology, in contrast to the more complex inflectional system of regular Tobelo. These discrepancies may indicate previous language erosion or independent linguistic evolution.

Tobelo Dalam preserves archaic Austronesian roots and forest-specific terminology, indicating cultural embeddedness and linguistic antiquity potentially associated with extended socio-geographic isolation. The increased word-order diversity in Tobelo Dalam indicates a preference for pragmatic emphasis rather than syntactic rigidity, a characteristic typical of languages with robust oral traditions. Moreover, the domain of language utilization demonstrates a significant functional divergence: Tobelo Dalam is restricted to intra-group verbal interactions, whereas Tobelo has the advantages of literacy and institutional support. Their divergences



substantiate the idea of linguistic autonomy and identity formation within the Tobelo Dalam group, highlighting the pressing necessity for language documentation and the possibility of classification as a unique language.

Linguistic Similarities: Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Language

The linguistic features standard to Tobelo Dalam and the Tobelo language substantially improve their mutual intelligibility. These characteristics encompass phonetic resemblances, common lexicon, and syntactic frameworks, which enhance communication between speakers of both types. The table below emphasizes significant linguistic similarities between the Tobelo Dalam variation and ordinary Tobelo, illustrating their common origins within the North Halmahera language group. Notwithstanding sociolinguistic diversity, both varieties exhibit considerable overlap in structural and lexical dimensions (Holton, 2010; Voorhoeve, 1988; Taylor, 1993).

Table 2. Linguistic Similarities: Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Language

Linguistic Feature	Tobelo Dalam	Tobelo Language
Pronouns	Shared basic pronoun system	Identical personal pronouns
Verb Morphology	Use of prefixes and infix for tense-aspect marking	Similar tense-aspect morphological structure
Reduplication	Reduplication used for intensification and plurality	Reduplication with equivalent semantic function
Numerals	Shared core numeral system (1–10)	Same numerical terms with minor pronunciation variation
Basic Syntax	Predominantly SVO word order	Consistently SVO structure

Table 2 outlines the core linguistic similarities that facilitate mutual intelligibility between Tobelo Dalam and standard Tobelo. The shared pronoun system and identical personal pronouns indicate a common proto-language and suggest relatively recent divergence. Similar tense-aspect morphological structures, including prefixes and infixes, further reinforce genealogical relatedness within the North Halmahera language group. Reduplication patterns, used for intensification and plurality, show semantic consistency across both varieties, revealing structural resilience amidst sociolinguistic divergence. Numerals from one to ten remain nearly identical, with only minor phonetic differences, a strong indicator of shared linguistic ancestry and ongoing contact.

While Tobelo Dalam exhibits more variability in syntax, as discussed in Table 1, this table suggests that at the foundational grammatical level—pronouns, verb morphology, and basic syntactic alignment—the two varieties maintain considerable alignment. These similarities are crucial in preserving intergroup communication and highlight a linguistic continuum shaped by convergence and divergence. However, while these overlaps confirm a shared linguistic root, they should not be mistaken for equivalence; instead, they provide the baseline for recognizing Tobelo Dalam as a distinct, albeit related, linguistic entity shaped by unique cultural and ecological pressures.

Cultural Similarities: Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Ethnic

The Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo tribes in North Moluccas exhibit cultural commonalities and distinctions in their traditional traditions and rituals. These disparities are frequently shaped



by external influences such as religion and social integration, whilst similarities may arise from everyday historical and geographical surroundings. The Tobelo Dalam, frequently regarded as more insular, preserve unique customs compared to the more assimilated Tobelo tribe. This overview will examine these cultural dynamics, emphasizing traditional customs and rituals. This table delineates notable cultural similarities between the Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo tribes, emphasizing shared traditions, values, and behaviours derived from mutual lineage and geographic proximity. The Tobelo Dalam inhabit remote forest regions, whilst the Tobelo reside in coastal and village environments; yet, both groups maintain essential aspects of the Tobelo cultural legacy (Platenkamp, 2019; Taylor, 1993; Van der Veen, 2009; Holton, 2010; Paul, 2005).

Table 3. Cultural Similarities: Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Ethnic

Cultural Feature	Tobelo Dalam	Tobelo Ethnic
Ancestor Worship	Practice of ancestral veneration in forest rituals	Regular ancestral rites in village temples
Kinship System	Patrilineal clans and oral genealogy	Shared patrilineal structure and clan names
Marriage Customs	Endogamous clan marriages are preferred	Similar preference for intra-clan marriage
Funeral Rites	Forest-based burial sites and spirit offerings	Coastal cemeteries with similar spirit rituals
Oral Tradition	Storytelling tied to hunting and forest myths	Storytelling for teaching morals and history

Table 3 illustrates the cultural connections between the Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo ethnic groups, highlighting a profound continuity rooted in common heritage, ceremonial practices, and social structures. Both cultures practice ancestor worship, albeit with differing spatial expressions—forest rites for the Tobelo Dalam and village temples for the Tobelo—indicating a shared cosmological base articulated through distinct environmental contexts. Patrilineal kinship networks and intersecting clan patterns indicate interconnected genealogical histories. Marriage rituals that promote endogamous activities in both groups enhance internal cohesion and preserve cultural boundaries.

Funeral customs also embody spiritual ideas associated with land and ancestors, but they are executed in spatially distinct manners (forest versus seaside cemeteries). Oral traditions in both communities serve as mnemonic devices and educational tools; however, the narratives of the Tobelo Dalam are more closely associated with subsistence practices and forest mythology, while Tobelo's storytelling encompasses a broader array of moral and historical teachings. Despite geographical and socioeconomic divisions, these communal cultural practices indicate a cultural foundation that surpasses ecological or political disparities. Maintaining these behaviours by the more secluded Tobelo Dalam indicates cultural resilience and highlights the necessity of safeguarding these traditions against the homogenizing influences of outward integration.

Ethnobiological Similarities: Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Tribes

The Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo tribes, native to Halmahera Island in Indonesia, demonstrate notable ethnobiological parallels, especially in their categorization and application of indigenous plant and animal species. Their folk biological systems have a profound cultural comprehension



of their environment, as seen by their knowledge of therapeutic plants and traditions of animal usage. The table below delineates the ethnobiological commonalities between the Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo tribes, highlighting their traditional knowledge systems about flora, wildlife, and ecological relationships. Ethnobiology in both tribes demonstrates profound historical linkages to the forest ecosystem alongside analogous classification and consumption systems (Yakub et al., 2019; Tamalene et al., Taylor, 1993; Van der Veen, 2009; Mahmud, 2022).

Table 4. Ethnobiological Similarities: Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Ethnic

Ethnobiological Element	Tobelo Dalam Practice	Tobelo Ethnic
Plant Classification	Plants classified by spiritual and medicinal value	Plants grouped by use: ritual, medicine, food
Animal Taboos	Certain birds and reptiles are not hunted due to ancestral taboos	Similar taboos on hunting specific forest animals
Forest Zoning	Sacred zones for ritual and healing	Designated forest areas for ceremonial use
Eco-Calendars	Seasonal hunting and harvesting tied to lunar cycles	Planting and foraging schedules follow natural signs
Medicinal Knowledge	Shared practices of herbal preparation and transmission	Medicinal plant use is passed down through oral tradition

Table 4 demonstrates the significant ethnobiological convergence between the Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo tribes based on their shared ecological legacy and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Both societies categorize plants and animals not solely by their utility but also via symbolic and spiritual aspects, embodying an animistic perspective in which nature is considered sacred and utilitarian. Both cultures assign particular plants for ritual, medicinal, and nutritional purposes, underscoring a cultural taxonomy that surpasses Western scientific classifications. Animal taboos, including restrictions on hunting specific avian and reptilian species, indicate shared ancestral beliefs potentially linked to clan totemism or legendary stories. Sanctified forest areas and eco-calendars aligned with lunar cycles exhibit advanced ecological oversight and resource administration. These systems represent a mode of biocultural conservation that has preserved biodiversity and cultural identity throughout generations. Orally transmitted medicinal knowledge highlights intergenerational continuity and communal learning. The ethnobiological overlap confirms that, despite geographical differences, both cultures maintain a consistent cognitive ecology. Identifying these practices as cultural property is crucial for preserving language and anthropology and environmental conservation efforts that respect indigenous knowledge systems.

Shared Medicinal Plant Terminologies: Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Ethnic

The Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo tribes demonstrate extensive ethnobotanical expertise, especially in medicinal and culinary flora. The Tobelo Dalam tribe, located in the Aketajawe Lolobata National Park, employs 44 species of medicinal plants, primarily from the Malvaceae family, to treat diseases like minor wounds and low stamina. The folk categorization system of the Tobelo tribe demonstrates a profound comprehension of local flora, featuring a systematic name



that highlights ancestral knowledge and cultural importance (Taylor, 1990). This table shows prevalent medicinal plant terminologies utilized by the Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo tribes, illustrating their collective ethnobotanical knowledge and traditional ecological practices. Both cultures employ analogous terminology and applications for flora prevalent in the tropical forests of North Halmahera, signifying profound cultural and linguistic continuity (Tamalene et al., 2016; Susiarti et al., 2025; Taylor, 1993; Van der Veen, 2009; Mahmud, 2022).

Table 5. Shared Medicinal Plant Terminologies: Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Ethnic

Plant Name (Local)	Tobelo Dalam Usage	Tobelo Usage
Gogoto	Used for treating fever and headaches; leaves boiled into tea	Used for fever; same preparation method
Ohe	Applied topically for cuts and infections	Same application for wounds and skin irritation
Sasoka	Roots boiled for digestive disorders	Roots are used similarly for stomach ailments
Tuwula	Leaves crushed and applied to bruises	Used for treating bruises and muscle aches
Wari	Used in spiritual cleansing rituals	It is also used in ritual healing and purification

The medicinal plant terminologies in Table 5 highlight a strong ethnobotanical knowledge system that demonstrates cultural unity and linguistic consistency between the Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo ethnic groups. Utilizing the same plant nomenclature and applications—such as Gogoto for pyrexia, Ohe for dermatological conditions, and Sasoka for gastrointestinal disorders—demonstrates a common language and a coherent cultural epistemology regarding health and healing. These terms function as linguistic conduits for ancestral knowledge, strengthening communal memory and social identity.

The concurrent preparation methods (e.g., boiling, topical treatment, spiritual usage) indicate that both societies utilize the same body of ecological knowledge, although existing in different environmental and geopolitical situations. The utilization of Wari in spiritual cleansing rites among these cultures is particularly significant, illustrating the intersection of medicinal and ritualistic roles in indigenous healing practices. This confluence underscores the interdependence of language, health, and spirituality within Tobelo cosmology. Documenting and preserving ethnobotanical terminology is essential for linguistic and cultural purposes and sustainable development since these practices provide critical insights into biodiversity-based traditional medicine systems that are increasingly endangered.

5.1.DISCUSSION

Linguistic Divergence between Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo Language

The linguistic differences between Tobelo Dalam and ordinary Tobelo contest the prevalent notion that the former is just a dialectal variant. The distinct phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics—such as Tobelo Dalam's numerous glottal stops, reduced verb morphology, and flexible word order—indicate an independent linguistic evolution



influenced by prolonged ecological isolation and oral tradition. These findings align with Himmelmann's (2007) notion of "under differentiated languages," in which minority variations may be recognized as distinct languages yet are frequently disregarded due to insufficient evidence.

The occurrence of archaic Austronesian vocabulary elements further substantiates the case for linguistic conservation and indicates the historical integration of Tobelo Dalam within a profound Austronesian substratum. Comparable divergence patterns due to socioecological isolation have been documented among other Austronesian communities (Blust, 2009). Moreover, the absence of written documentation and insufficient institutional backing renders Tobelo Dalam highly susceptible to language shift, reflecting Fishman's (1991) conclusions regarding the reversal of language loss in endangered communities. This highlights the necessity for comprehensive language documentation and a reclassification initiative that honours the linguistic integrity and social sovereignty of Tobelo Dalam.

Linguistic Convergence and Mutual Intelligibility

Notwithstanding structural differences, Tobelo Dalam preserves essential similarities with regular Tobelo that promote mutual comprehension. Pronoun systems, fundamental syntax, and morphological structures exhibit significant alignment, indicating a common proto-language and ongoing interaction. This language convergence corroborates Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory that identity is emergent and relational, moulded through interaction and collective linguistic practices. Retaining fundamental numerals and reduplication patterns underscores a cultural-linguistic continuum despite growing social marginalization. This convergence corresponds with findings in other North Halmahera languages, where proximity promotes the preservation of fundamental grammatical structures (Voorhoeve, 1988).

The similar characteristics signify both genealogical connection and strategic cultural bargaining, wherein linguistic familiarity allows Tobelo Dalam speakers to sustain intergroup interactions without complete assimilation. This dynamic supports Woolard and Schieffelin's (1994) concept of language ideologies, in which speakers manoeuvre through symbolic and pragmatic influences in multilingual contexts. Consequently, whereas Tobelo Dalam emphasizes its linguistic distinctiveness through divergence, its common grammatical foundation with Tobelo demonstrates a dual process of difference and connection—crucial for the community's survival in a dynamic sociolinguistic environment.

Cultural Continuity through Ritual and Kinship Practices

The cultural similarities between Tobelo Dalam and the broader Tobelo community—especially in ancestor veneration, family structures, and oral traditions—highlight a continuous cultural foundation influenced by common lineage and ritual cosmology. These commonalities validate Scott's (2009) concept of "non-state peoples" preserving autonomous cultural traditions in peripheral areas. The Tobelo Dalam's inclination towards forest-centric rites and intra-clan matrimony reflects Tobelo traditions, expressed in geographically unique forms influenced by their arboreal lifestyles.

These findings correspond with Platenkamp's (2019) research on the Tobelo rite as a conduit for social integration and cosmic continuity. Despite physical and institutional segregation,



the Tobelo Dalam preserve oral storytelling traditions that serve as moral education and cultural transmission, reflecting Finnegan's (1992) focus on the instructional function of oral traditions. These communal behaviours indicate retention and the active reproduction of cultural identity through quotidian rituals and family, strengthening the ethnolinguistic vitality articulated by Fishman (1991). In this framework, language encodes and enacts cultural memory, with each ritual and family performance maintaining the boundaries and coherence of Tobelo Dalam's identity in the face of external influences.

Ethnobiological Knowledge and Ecological Cognition

The ethnobiological commonalities between the Tobelo Dalam and the wider Tobelo community indicate a profound cognitive ecology and standard classification systems influenced by their connection with the forest. Practices like forest zoning, animal taboos, and eco-calendars exemplify an ecological knowledge system that corresponds with Duranti's (1997) perspective of language as a culturally embedded action. These traditional ecological systems serve as survival tactics and cultural manifestations, acting as "biocultural memory" (Harrison, 2007). The uniform nomenclature and use of flora and fauna indicate a historically uninterrupted environmental epistemology, as evidenced in research on the Togutil and other Halmahera tribes (Yakub et al., 2019).

These knowledge systems are vital to cultural persistence and indicate the necessity of incorporating Indigenous classification into comprehensive conservation programs. Moreover, these findings demonstrate that linguistic and biological classifications co-evolve; flora and fauna are designated, categorized, and conceptualized based on culturally significant categories, underscoring the necessity of ethnolinguistic fieldwork to document these systems prior to their degradation due to developmental pressures. Consequently, the ethnobiological knowledge of the Tobelo Dalam serves as both a language repository and a resource for future environmental management.

Ethnobotanical Lexicon and Spiritual-Medical Practices

The standard medicinal plant terminology between the Tobelo Dalam and Tobelo ethnic groups provides substantial evidence of linguistic and cultural continuity. Similar nomenclature and applications—exemplified by Gogoto for fever and Wari for spiritual purification—suggest a convergent health epistemology grounded in ancestral wisdom. These behaviours exemplify Foley's (1997) idea that linguistic structures are profoundly interconnected with semantic domains, especially within Indigenous medical discourse. Consistent nomenclature indicates steady oral transmission routes and corroborates Mahmud's (2022) results on folk botanical taxonomy in North Maluku. The convergence of ritual and medicinal roles, shown by the dual use of Wari, illustrates an integrative health system in which spiritual and physical well-being are linguistically and culturally interconnected. This lexicon, conveyed orally and frequently inscribed in metaphorical and ritualistic language, also embodies Finnegan's (1992) assertion that verbal arts safeguard communal health practices. Consequently, the medicinal lexicon of the Tobelo Dalam is not solely utilitarian but also emblematic, embodying identity through therapeutic rituals. The preservation of this lexicon is essential for linguistic history, bio-cultural conservation, and possible contributions to integrative health systems based on indigenous knowledge.



This study's findings effectively verify the research purpose of examining the relationship between language and identity within the Tobelo Dalam tribe by demonstrating significant linguistic variation from mainstream Tobelo. The variations—spanning phonological to syntactic structures—validate the linguistic sovereignty of Tobelo Dalam and bolster the case for its acknowledgement as a separate language. Furthermore, preserved archaic Austronesian vocabulary and oral traditions highlight a profound cultural continuity corresponding to the tribe's historical and ecological particularities. These results validate the study's initial assertion that language serves as a means of communication and a repository of cultural memory, social structure, and identity representation. Moreover, the noted convergence in fundamental linguistic characteristics and common ethnobotanical terminology underscores the multiple processes of difference and linkage described in the introduction, emphasizing genetic ties and societal resilience. This study enhances a comprehensive understanding of how language structures and practices reflect and form the collective identity of the Tobelo Dalam by integrating linguistic, anthropological, and ecological factors. These findings directly address the academic deficiencies noted in the introduction and underscore the need for micro-level language documentation to facilitate Indigenous cultural preservation and self-determination.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

6.1. Conclusion

This study has shown that the Tobelo Dalam tribe has a unique language and cultural identity despite often being categorized within the larger Tobelo ethnic group. Through an extensive linguistic and ethnographic investigation, the research uncovered notable phonological, morphological, and lexical differences, as well as ecological and oral traditions that validate the linguistic independence of the Tobelo Dalam. The common grammatical foundation and ethnobiological understanding of the Tobelo people suggest a genealogical relationship that facilitates mutual intelligibility and historical linkage. These findings corroborate the study's principal thesis: that language is both a barrier and a conduit for developing identity among marginalized indigenous populations. Tobelo Dalam is a unique language entity, not simply a dialect, formed by natural seclusion, cultural persistence, and oral tradition. This conclusion advocates for linguistic recognition, documentation, and protection as vital actions for safeguarding the cultural and intellectual heritage of the Tobelo Dalam people.

6.2. Implication

This study's ramifications include scholarly discussion and practical efforts to preserve indigenous languages. Acknowledging Tobelo Dalam as a separate language contest current classification systems and highlights the imperative for detailed linguistic documentation, particularly within marginalized communities. The shared cultural and linguistic attributes with the predominant Tobelo population indicate an identity continuum that policymakers and linguists should consider when developing culturally responsive language revitalization initiatives. This research confirms the importance of integrating linguistic anthropology, oral tradition studies, and ethnobotany to comprehensively comprehend the dynamics of identity creation. The Tobelo Dalam instance illustrates how indigenous languages encapsulate ecological knowledge, social frameworks, and ancestral heritage for stakeholders in education, culture, and environmental conservation. Consequently, safeguarding these languages is both a cultural necessity and a contributor.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Adi F. Mahmud is a lecturer at the University of Muhammadiyah North Maluku, Ternate, Indonesia. He is also a social observer focusing on vulnerable communities and indigenous tribes. His research interests lie in linguistics and language education.

M. Nasir Tamalene is an academic and researcher from Indonesia, affiliated with Khairun University in Ternate, North Maluku. He has a background in biology, and his primary research focus is on ethnobiology, wildlife conservation, and ecotourism, which is based on local wisdom. Dr Tamalene is known for his contributions to documenting and preserving traditional knowledge of Indigenous communities in the North Maluku region. Some of the research topics he has explored include The Use of Medicinal Plants by the Togutil Ethnic Group: This study identified 48 plant species from 23 families used by the Togutil people on Halmahera Island for consumption and traditional medicine.

REFERENCES

- [1] Agoos, E. (2020). Linguistic Essentialism and Indigenous Authenticity: The Role of Indigenous Languages in Defining Indigeneity. *Inquiries Journal*, 12(9). <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1790/linguistic-essentialism-and-indigenous-authenticity-the-role-of-indigenous-languages-in-defining-indigeneity>.
- [2] Asteria, D., Brotosusilo, A., Soedrajad, M. R., & Nugraha, F. N. (2021). Reinventarization of living procedures, local knowledge, and wisdom to the environment (Study case on Tobelo Tribe-Halmahera). *IOP Conference Series Earth and Environmental Science*, 716(1), 12050. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/716/1/012050>
- [3] Austin, P. K., & Sallabank, J. (Eds.). (2011). *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975981>
- [4] Blust, R. (2009). *The Austronesian Languages*. Pacific Linguistics.
- [5] Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural, linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4-5), 585–614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144560505440>.
- [6] Dorian, N. C. (1981). Language Death. In University of Pennsylvania Press eBooks. University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512815580>
- [7] Duncan, C. R. (2009). Reconciliation and Revitalization: The Resurgence of Tradition in Postconflict Tobelo, North Maluku, Eastern Indonesia. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 68(4), 1077. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002191180999074x>
- [8] Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Finnegan, R. (1992). *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*. Routledge..
- [10] Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- [11] Foley, W. A. (1997). *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishers.
- [12] Graeber, D. (2004). *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- [13] Harrison, K. D. (2007). *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.



- [14] Himmelmann, N. P. (2007). Language documentation: What is it, and what is it good for? In J. Gippert, N. P. Himmelmann, & U. Mosel (Eds.), *Essentials of Language Documentation* (pp. 1–30). Mouton de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110197730.1>
- [15] Himmelmann, N. P. (2007). Language documentation: What is it, and what is it good for? In Gippert, J., Himmelmann, N. P., & Mosel, U. (Eds.), *Essentials of Language Documentation* (pp. 1–30). Mouton de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110197730.1>
- [16] Harrison, K. D. (2007). *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.
- [17] Holton, G. (2010). Tobelo. In A. Adelaar & N. P. Himmelmann (Eds.), *The Austronesian Languages of Asia and Madagascar* (pp. 123–146). Routledge.
- [18] Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and Culture*. Oxford University Press.
- [19] Kulick, D. (1992). *Language Shift and Cultural Reproduction: Socialization, Self and Syncretism in a Papua New Guinean Village*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527661>
- [20] Kulikov, L. I. (n.d.). *Tobelo (Review)*. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2007.0079>
- [21] Li, L. (2020). Relationship between language and culture. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus Humanitarian Series*, 65(1), 71. <https://doi.org/10.29235/2524-2369-2020-65-1-71-77>
- [22] Mahmud, A. F. (2022). Ethnobotanical practices among indigenous groups in North Maluku. *Journal of Southeast Asian Ethnobiology*, 14(2), 115–130.
- [23] Noletto, I. A. C., & Lopes, S. A. T. (2020). Heptapod B and whorfianism. *Language extrapolation in science fiction*. *Acta Scientiarum Language and Culture*, 42(1). <https://doi.org/10.4025/actascilangcult.v42i1.51769>
- [24] Okeogu, C. (2017). A distinctive aspect of translation is the culture. *African Research Review*, 11(1), 192. <https://doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v11i1.14>
- [25] Paul, K. (2005). *Tribal Health and Development: Some Sociocultural Dimensions*. 5(2), 257–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0976343020050214>
- [26] Platenkamp, J. D. M. (2019). To Be Made Part of the Tobelo Society (North Moluccas). In Springer eBooks (p. 131). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16703-5_8
- [27] Platenkamp, J. D. M. (2007). Temporality and male-female distinctions in the Tobelo vocabulary of relationships. *Social Anthropology*, 6(3), 291.
- [28] Putri, W. F., Mahbub, A. S., & Dassir, M. (2019). Local wisdom application of Tobelo dalam community in its relation with national parks in North Maluku, Indonesia. *IOP Conference Series Earth and Environmental Science*, 343(1), 12042. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/343/1/012042>
- [29] Rojas, C. (2020). Indigenous languages contribute to preserving biodiversity and their presence in international environmental law. *Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy*, 23(1), 44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13880292.2020.1768693>
- [30] Saliman, Wibowo, S., Widiastuti, A., & Rosardi, R. G. (2021). The Role of Village Tourism in Environmental Education and Social Disaster Management. *IOP Conference Series Earth*



- and Environmental Science, 884(1), 12052. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/884/1/012052>
- [31] Samorai, J. L. (2020). Rethinking Indigenous Languages: Das Questões, 10(1), 57. <https://doi.org/10.26512/dasquestoes.v10i1.32344>
- [32] Scott, J. C. (2009). *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.
- [33] Scanlon, C., & Singh, M. (2006). Theorizing the decline of linguistic diversity. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2006(182), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2006.066>
- [34] Susiarti, S., Rahayu, M., & Royyani, M. F. (2015). *Pengetahuan dan Pemanfaatan Tumbuhan Obat Masyarakat Tobelo Dalam di Maluku Utara (Knowledge on Medicinal Plants of Tobelo Dalam Community in North Moluccas)*.
- [35] Tamalene, M. N., Irawati Al Muhdhar, M. H., Suarsini, E., & Rohman, F. (2016). Study of ethnobotany of medicinal plant of Tobelo Dalam (Togutil) ethnic group of Halmahera Island, Indonesia. *Medicinal Plants - International Journal of Phytomedicines and Related Industries*, 8(2), 127–136. <https://doi.org/10.5958/0975-6892.2016.00016.2>
- [36] Taylor, P. M. (2025). Tobelorese Ethnobiology: The Folk Classification of “Biotic Forms.” https://www.academia.edu/38696334/Tobelorese_Ethnobiology_The_Folk_Classification_of_Biotic_Forms
- [37] Taylor, P. (1993). *The Indonesian Archipelago: A Cultural and Historical Geography*. Allen & Unwin.
- [38] The Folk Biology of the Tobelo People. (2013). <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/8530558/the-folk-biology-of-the-tobelo-people-smithsonian-institution->
- [39] Taylor, P. (1990). *Folk Biology of the Tobelo People: A Study in Folk Classification*. 34, 1–187. <https://doi.org/10.5479/SI.00810223.34.1>
- [40] UNESCO. (2011). *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. UNESCO Publishing. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026>
- [41] Varennes, F. de, & Kuzborska, E. (2016). Language, Rights and Opportunities: The Role of Language in the Inclusion and Exclusion of Indigenous Peoples. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 23(3), 281. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-02303004>
- [42] Van der Veen, L. (2009). *Tobelo Marriage and Ritual: Kinship, Cosmology, and Exchange in North Halmahera, Indonesia*. Leiden University Press.
- [43] Voorhoeve, C. L. (1988). The languages of the North Halmahera group are Irian Jaya. *Pacific Linguistics*, Series D(73), 181–208.
- [44] Woolard, K. A., & Schieffelin, B. B. (1994). Language ideology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, 55–82. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.23.100194.000415>
- [45] Yakub, A., Leksono, A. S., & Batoro, J. (2019). *Ethnobotany of Medicinal and Edible Plants of Tobelo Dalam Tribe in Aketajawe Lolobata National Park Area*. 10(1), 45–50. <https://doi.org/10.21776/UB.JPAL.2019.010.01.08>

