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Negotiating Identity and Language in Child-Naming: Parental Perspectives in Minangkabau–Japanese Intercultural Marriages

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Article Information	Abstract
Received : May 20, 2025 Revised : June 18, 2025 Accepted : June 20, 2025 Published: June 25, 2025	This study explores the practice of naming children in Minangkabau–Japanese intercultural families from linguistic and socio-cultural perspectives. A child’s name reflects identity, cultural values, and the ethnic affiliations of parents from two distinct cultural backgrounds. Based on qualitative data from questionnaires, this research reveals naming strategies and the dynamics of identity negotiation involved in the process. The contrasting cultural contexts—Minangkabau as the world’s largest matrilineal society, and Japan with its traditional patrilineal “ie” system—form the backdrop for fundamental differences in views on lineage, family name inheritance, and family role structures. This study discusses how such intercultural couples negotiate these differences in daily life, decision-making, and especially in naming their children, which often reflects cultural and linguistic compromises. The findings indicate tendencies toward acculturation, assimilation, or even the formation of a new hybrid system, enriching discourse in anthropological linguistics and identity studies within multicultural families.
Keywords	
Interaction; culture; language; Minangkabau; Japan; identity.	
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INTRODUCTION

Naming a child is an essential aspect of identity formation. A name not only serves as an administrative marker but also carries symbolic meaning that reflects the parents’ hopes, values, and cultural heritage (Arndt & Ruck, 2005). In Minangkabau culture, naming plays a significant role within the social structure and traditional customs. Traditional names such as *Hayati* (life), *Putri* (noble daughter), and *Rajo* (king) often contain deep philosophical meanings and serve as forms of respect for ancestors or community figures (Sijabat, 2016).

Similarly, in Japanese culture, the process of naming is carefully considered, emphasizing symbolic, spiritual, and aesthetic values. Names like *Haruka* (“far distance”), *Sakura* (cherry blossom, a symbol of beauty and impermanence), and *Taro* (first-born son) express parental hopes and life philosophies (Ichibashi & Uchiyama, 2009). Over time, naming patterns in Japan have evolved, with modern names tending to be more varied and distinct from those of previous generations (Unser-Schutz, 2016).

In the context of Minangkabau–Japanese mixed families, the practice of naming children becomes increasingly complex and intriguing to explore. Names not only reflect the cultural values parents wish to pass on but also become symbols of multicultural identity

shaped by the interaction of two distinct cultures. Naming in mixed families serves as an important means of preserving cultural continuity while also forming a unique, new identity.

Thus, research on naming strategies within Minangkabau–Japanese families becomes essential to understanding the role of language and culture in identity formation. This study not only explores the meanings behind names but also reveals the dynamics of identity negotiation and cross-cultural interaction as reflected in the naming practices of their children.

Based on this background, the research questions proposed are as follows:

1. How are Minangkabau and Japanese cultural values and meanings reflected in the names chosen by Minangkabau–Japanese couples for their children?
2. How are Minangkabau and Japanese cultural identities constructed and transmitted through child-naming practices in Minangkabau–Japanese mixed families?

Intercultural or cross-national marriages are becoming increasingly common in today's global society. Advances in information technology, transportation, and growing cultural openness have enabled individuals from diverse backgrounds to form relationships, often leading to marriage. This phenomenon also brings about changes in social and cultural practices, including child-naming traditions.

Although no specific studies have been found on child-naming practices in Minangkabau–Japanese mixed families, several previous studies provide a relevant theoretical foundation. Gerritzen (2008), for instance, examined the relationship between children's given names in Western countries and the phenomenon of globalization. He argued that the similarity of names across countries reflects a process of internationalization, in which parents recognize that their children are not only part of a local community but also members of a global society.

Another study by Nurhayati (2013) showed that personal names are not merely referential tools but also serve as a medium for negotiating social and cultural identity. In the context of the Gotputuk community, the choice of names reflects social status dynamics and the community's worldview. Names can serve as symbols of status, tools to emphasize or conceal certain identities, and reflect the cultural values upheld by society. These two studies demonstrate that naming is not a neutral practice; rather, it is rich with social and cultural meaning and serves as a crucial medium in the construction of individual identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Names as Markers of Cultural Identity

According to Danesi and Perron (1999), names possess indexical, symbolic, and, in certain contexts, iconic qualities. A name is not merely a linguistic sign but is also full of cultural meanings that can reflect both social and personal identity. Therefore, exploring the meaning behind names can offer insights into the cultural construction of a society. In the Japanese context, generational gaps in naming practices, which reflect shifts in cultural values and preferences (Unser-Schutz, 2016, Tanaka, 1996). Honda (2005) noted that naming in Japan is highly open to innovation, especially following the Meiji era, which marked the beginning of Westernization and the implementation of a more structured naming system. Compared to countries like Iceland or Tajikistan, which impose restrictions on name choices, Japan demonstrates a greater degree of flexibility, contributing to the emergence of new names with unique characters and symbolic meanings.

Stuart Hall's theory of identity provides a crucial foundation for understanding the dynamics of child-naming practices within mixed families. Hall argues that identity is not fixed, but rather dynamic and contextual (Hall, [1997](#)). Identity is formed through processes of representation and negotiation between the individual and their social and cultural environment. In the context of cross-cultural families, a child's identity is the result of interaction between two distinct cultural systems.

Hall's concept of "hybrid identity" is particularly relevant to understanding the children of intercultural marriages. Their identity is not a simple sum of two cultures, but rather a unique synthesis of various cultural elements. In this regard, a name becomes a concrete representation of their hybrid identity. A name can function as a tool for navigating and negotiating social positioning, signaling cultural affiliation, or even symbolizing resistance to dominant cultural norms. Five key aspects of Hall's identity theory that can be applied to this study include: (1) the formation of hybrid identity, (2) the role of names in identity negotiation, (3) the influence of cultural context on naming processes, (4) power and representation in identity construction, and (5) cultural exchange manifested in naming practices.

Ethno-linguistic Theory

Ethno-linguistic theory, as explained by Gumperz ([1982](#)), emphasizes the close relationship between language and culture. Language is not merely seen as a linguistic system but as an integral part of cultural practice. In the context of naming, this theory helps to explain how name choices carry cultural values and reflect group identity. Ethno-linguistics views names as cultural symbols that convey social messages. Therefore, the naming of children in Minangkabau–Japanese mixed families can be analyzed as a cultural process that reflects a negotiation of meaning between two symbolic systems—namely, the language and cultural values of Minangkabau and Japan.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at providing an in-depth portrayal of the phenomenon of child naming within Minangkabau–Japanese mixed families. This approach was chosen for its relevance in uncovering meanings, cultural values, and identity negotiation processes that cannot be explained quantitatively. The focus of the research lies in understanding the meanings behind the given names and the cultural backgrounds influencing the decision-making process.

Data sources for this study were obtained through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews distributed to members of the Minangkabau–Japanese family community. The data collected includes information about the child's name, the reasons for its selection, its embedded meanings, and the parents' aspirations associated with the name. The researcher employed purposive sampling to select respondents, intentionally choosing individuals or families relevant to the research focus—namely, Minangkabau–Japanese families who had named their children and were willing to share the stories behind the naming process.

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, identifying key themes emerging from respondents' narratives, such as symbolic meanings, cultural influences, and identity negotiations in the naming process. This was conducted inductively to capture both the explicit and implicit values present in each case.

The research was conducted through literature study and online field observation, given that the mixed-family community is geographically dispersed. The research was carried out over a six-month period, from April 2024 to October 2024.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The naming of children born to Minangkabau–Japanese couples demonstrates a unique cultural fusion, with values and meanings that represent both cultural backgrounds. Based on a study of 15 mixed families, naming patterns were found that combine elements of both Japanese and Minangkabau cultures. In these families, the child-naming process reflects an integration of the cultures, values, and languages of both parents. Children’s names typically blend Minangkabau or Islamic elements—which highlight religious identity and traditional Minangkabau values—with Japanese elements that provide philosophical and aesthetic meanings through *kanji*. Several naming patterns were identified:

1. Given Name (Japanese) + Father’s Name (Minangkabau)

Naruhito Ali
Hirowati Ali

2. Given Name (Japanese) + Father’s Clan Name (Minangkabau) + Mother’s Family Name (Japanese)

Kenta Chaniago Takahashi
Kazuya Chaniago Takahashi

3. Mother’s Family Name (Japanese) + Given Name

Mori Mirai
Mori Rukia

4. Given Name + Father’s Family Name (Japanese) / Father’s Family Name (Japanese) + Given Name

Asiyah Aoki
Kanda Hiroyuki
Uehara Kenjiro
Kobayashi Arisa
Igari Kenta
Kondo Ahmad Seiki

The naming of children in Minangkabau–Japanese mixed families reflect a fusion of values, cultures, and languages from both sides. The chosen names are the result of a harmonious negotiation of cultural identity, creating a hybrid identity for the children. The following are key points:

1. Dual-Cultural Naming

The name **Naruhito Ali** represents a blend of Japanese, Arabic, and Indonesian—specifically Minangkabau—cultural elements. *Naruhito*, taken from the name of the Emperor

of Japan, means "virtue" and "person," reflecting the child's connection to the mother's Japanese heritage. *Ali*, the father's name, is of Arabic origin, meaning "high" or "noble," and reflects the strong Islamic values embedded in Minangkabau culture. Although there is no explicit use of the Minangkabau language in the name, its selection still conveys core Minangkabau values such as honor, lineage, and lofty aspirations. This name combination illustrates the harmonization of multicultural identity and serves as a symbolic integration of Minangkabau and Japanese cultures within the child.

The name **Hirowati** reflects a cultural fusion between Japanese and Minangkabau traditions. It is derived from *Hiroko*, a common Japanese female name composed of the kanji "寛" (*hiro*), meaning "broad-minded" or "tolerant," and "子" (*ko*), meaning "child" or "daughter." Through cultural adaptation, the suffix *-ko* was replaced with *-wati*, a common ending in Minangkabau female names that conveys femininity and gentleness. This fusion demonstrates an effort to harmonize cultural identities, merging the positive meanings from both cultures into a single name.

2. Mixed Name Structure

These names richly reflect the cultural fusion of Minangkabau and Japanese heritage, where elements from both cultures are represented through the choice of given names, clan names, and family names. The name **Kenta Chaniago Takahashi** embodies a meaningful blend of Minangkabau and Japanese cultural values. *Kenta*, a Japanese name meaning "wise" and "strong," reflects Japanese cultural ideals. *Chaniago*, the Minangkabau clan name from the father's side, signifies an effort to preserve Minangkabau cultural identity within a matrilineal system, honoring the importance of clan lineage. Meanwhile, *Takahashi*, the mother's family name, represents the Japanese tradition that emphasizes the significance of family names in personal identity. This name combination exemplifies a hybrid identity and the harmonization of values from both cultures within an intercultural family.

3. Phonetic and Cultural Adaptation

Several Minangkabau names undergo phonetic adjustments to make them easier to pronounce and more acceptable within the Japanese cultural context. For example, the name **Naurah** is adapted to **Nauroh**. *Naurah* is an Islamic-influenced name meaning "flower" or "light," and is quite popular among the Minangkabau community. The change to *Nauroh* retains the original sound and meaning but is modified to align with Japanese phonological patterns, such as replacing the final "a" with "o" to sound more natural to Japanese speakers. Similarly, names like **Lucky** or **Luki**, commonly used in Minangkabau culture, are adjusted to **Rukia** to better fit Japanese phonetic structures.

These adaptations reflect a form of linguistic compromise that does not erase the original identity but rather bridges two linguistic and cultural systems. This phenomenon illustrates the efforts of parents to preserve local cultural values and meanings while adapting them to the linguistic norms of their partners, ultimately creating names that are both meaningful and acceptable to both cultural communities.

4. Symbolic Meaning in Japanese Kanji

The name 甲斐裕貴 (**Kai Hiroki**) is composed of the kanji 裕 (**Hiro**), meaning "abundance" or "prosperity," and 貴 (**Ki**), meaning "noble" or "precious." This combination

reflects the parents' aspirations for their child to grow up in well-being—materially, emotionally, and socially—and to become a noble, respected individual. These values align with Minangkabau culture, which, despite its matrilineal system, places significant importance on sons as bearers of social responsibility and guardians of family honor.

Meanwhile, the family name 甲斐 (**Kai**) means “useful” or “helpful,” and also refers to a historical region in Japan known for prominent figures such as Takeda Shingen. The name carries connotations of responsibility, courage, and a spirit of helping others. In Minangkabau culture, such values resonate with the principles of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and strong communal solidarity.

Overall, although **Kai Hiroki** originates from Japanese naming traditions, the symbolic meanings embedded in it—nobility, prosperity, responsibility, and social contribution—also reflect core Minangkabau values. This reveals a cross-cultural alignment of values that contributes to the formation of a richly meaningful hybrid identity.

5. Affirmation of Hybrid Identity

The naming practices in Minangkabau–Japanese families reflect an affirmation of hybrid identity rich in cultural meaning and symbolic value. Names such as **Omiya Ren Faishal Arif Haikal**, **Omiya Rai Faishal Hanif Naufal**, and **Omiya Aina Falisha Hanifa Ramadhan** demonstrate a connection to Japanese culture through the selection of *kanji* that convey life philosophy, nature, and personal character. At the same time, the inclusion of names rooted in Minangkabau and Islamic traditions—such as *Arif*, *Haikal*, *Faishal*, *Hanif*, and *Ramadhan*—reinforces the religious and cultural identity inherited from the Indonesian side.

Through these names, families not only unite two cultures but also express the values and aspirations they wish to pass on to their children. The naming process becomes a tangible expression of harmonious intercultural negotiation, as well as a symbolic strategy for constructing a multicultural identity that is rich, balanced, and meaningful.

6. Emphasis on Family Values

The name **Mori Mirai** (森美来) reflects the parents' hopes for a beautiful and meaningful future for their child. The kanji *Mirai* conveys notions of beauty and the future, while *Mori*, as the family name, symbolizes peace, balance, and a spiritual connection to nature—values deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

Although the name is Japanese, the meaning behind *Mirai* aligns with Minangkabau family values, which place great importance on a child's future as the bearer of tradition and as someone who brings benefit to both family and community. This naming choice shows that the family's decision is not solely based on aesthetics, but also serves as an expression of the noble cross-cultural values they wish to pass on to their child.

CONCLUSION

In Minangkabau–Japanese mixed families, the process of naming children reflects a combination of languages and cultural values from both sides. Minangkabau language or Islamic names are often used to convey religious identity and traditional Minangkabau values, while Japanese names provide deeper philosophical and aesthetic meanings through the use of *kanji*. This naming practice is the result of a harmonious negotiation of cultural identity, where each name represents a fusion of two distinct yet complementary worlds.

Minangkabau and Japanese cultural identities are constructed and transmitted through child-naming practices by combining key elements from both cultures. Islamic names from Minangkabau culture offer religious and customary identity, while Japanese names enriched with meaningful *kanji* contribute important philosophical and symbolic heritage. These findings are important as they can serve as a reference for other intercultural families in shaping their children's identities in a balanced and meaningful way. Additionally, they can inspire policymakers to design more inclusive policies regarding identity recognition within multicultural societies.

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