

TRADITIONAL FISHERMEN'S MANTRAS IN WHALE HUNTING RITUALS OF LAMALERA, LEMBATA REGENCY: AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the linguistic and cultural functions of traditional mantras used by the Lamalera fishing community in Eastern Indonesia during whale-hunting rituals. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in linguistic ethnography, the research investigates how these ritual utterances encode cosmological beliefs, enact social roles, and sustain community identity. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of oral texts, followed by thematic and structural analysis. Findings reveal that the mantras fall into four functional categories—opening, summoning, protective, and thanksgiving—each closely tied to specific stages of the ritual. Linguistically, the mantras exhibit formulaic features such as repetition, parallelism, and sacred lexicon, serving both mnemonic and performative purposes. Culturally, these utterances act as symbolic bridges between the living and the ancestral, embedding ecological knowledge and moral codes within poetic structures. However, the research also highlights a concerning decline in intergenerational transmission, exacerbated by modernization and lack of institutional preservation. This study contributes to the fields of ethnolinguistics and linguistic anthropology by illustrating how ritual language functions as both sacred speech and a repository of indigenous knowledge. It calls for urgent documentation and revitalization efforts to safeguard the linguistic heritage of maritime communities like Lamalera.

Keywords : *Ethnolinguistics; Ritual Language; Mantra; Lamalera; Whale Hunting; Oral Tradition; Cultural Identity; Language Endangerment; Sacred Lexicon; Performative Speech.*



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INTRODUCTION

Lamalera, a fishing village located in Lembata Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, is known as the only community in Indonesia that has preserved the traditional practice of whale hunting across generations. This tradition is not merely an economic activity or a means of subsistence, but also a cultural ritual imbued with profound spiritual and symbolic meanings. In every phase of the whale-hunting process from *tobu nama fatta* (the opening ritual of the fishing season) to the homecoming ceremony fishermen recite sacred mantras believed to connect them with their ancestors, ensure protection at sea, and increase the likelihood of a successful hunt.

The use of mantras by the Lamalera community represents a unique form of oral heritage. Yet, it remains understudied particularly from an ethnolinguistic perspective. As noted by Finnegan (1977) and Danandjaja (1986), oral traditions such as mantras play a crucial role in shaping the symbolic structures and collective consciousness of traditional societies. Mantras are not only spiritual expressions; they also function as linguistic devices rich with local values, distinctive syntactic structures, and ritual vocabulary that reflect the worldview of their speakers.

Previous studies on Lamalera's cultural lexicon include that of Widarsini (2021), who highlighted the richness of local terminology in *Suara Samudra*, a novel by Maria Matildis Banda. Her research identified key cultural terms such as *koteklema* (whale), *lamafa* (harpooner), and *peledang* (traditional boat), all of which are central semantic markers in Lamalera's cultural system. Meanwhile, Bala et al. (2023) examined the barter lexicon between Lamalera fishers and the farming communities on Mount Labalekan's slopes, illustrating that language serves not only as a medium of transaction but also as a social instrument for fostering trust and solidarity. However, no studies have yet examined in

detail the linguistic structure, sacred lexicon, and deep meanings embedded in mantras within the context of whale-hunting rituals.

This research is therefore both significant and timely, especially when considered in light of Boli's (2018) findings, which emphasized the Lamalera people's belief in the spiritual essence of inanimate objects, and how inter-ethnic interactions within their maritime tradition shape their social and spiritual identity. Accordingly, this study does not merely aim to describe mantras as verbal texts, but also to explore how their structure, lexicon, and embedded meanings reflect Lamalera's cosmology, social values, and the collective power sustained within its fishing community.

Using an ethnolinguistic approach, this study provides an in-depth analysis of ritual language as part of a dynamic cultural practice. As Kridalaksana (2001) has proposed and as further supported by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Whorf, 1956; Ibrahim & Mayani, 2019) language does not merely reflect reality; it actively shapes perception, social relationships, and belief systems. Thus, analyzing the structure, lexical choices, and meaning of these mantras contributes to a broader understanding of how language operates within sacred spaces functioning both as a medium of spiritual transcendence and a glue of collective identity.

Regrettably, under the growing influence of globalization and modernization, this practice is increasingly marginalized. Younger generations are becoming disconnected from the meanings and significance of these mantras. If not documented and studied academically, this intangible heritage is at serious risk of extinction. Therefore, this research is not only a descriptive-linguistic effort, but also contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, the documentation of minority languages, and the strengthening of local identity amid changing times.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a linguistic ethnography design, aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the structure, meaning, and sociocultural function of the traditional mantras used by the Lamalera fishing community during whale hunting rituals. The ethnolinguistic approach was chosen because the object of study intertwines dimensions of language, culture, and social practice. As emphasized by Kramsch (1998), language cannot be separated from the cultural context and the collective worldview of its speakers.

Research Site and Subjects

The research was conducted in Lamalera Village, Wulandoni District, Lembata Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province. The site was selected purposively, as it is the only community in Indonesia that still preserves the traditional whale-hunting practice accompanied by the ritual use of mantras as an integral element.

The research subjects included:

- Primary informants: customary elders, spiritual figures (*ata molan*), and senior whale hunters (*lamafa*, *ata pou*) who are directly involved in chanting and interpreting the mantras.
- Supporting informants: younger generation fishermen, community leaders, and traditional boat (*peledang*) craftsmen who possess contextual knowledge of Lamalera's maritime culture.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling using the snowball technique, whereby initial participants referred other individuals deemed knowledgeable about the research topic.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three main techniques:

1. In-depth interviews: Conducted semi-structurally to explore participants' understanding, perceptions, and experiences related to the chanting and meanings of the mantras.
2. Participant observation: The researcher engaged directly in the ritual activities—before sailing, during hunting at sea, and after returning to land—to observe the contextual use and sociocultural setting of the mantra performance.
3. Documentation study: Included audio recordings of mantras, handwritten ancestral texts, and other relevant customary records.

All field data were recorded, transcribed, and complemented with detailed field notes to support triangulation.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis involved the following steps:

1. Transcription and classification of mantras: To identify the types of mantras based on their function and the timing of their use within the hunting rituals.
2. Linguistic analysis: Covered syntactic structure, morphology, and unique lexical choices found in the mantras.
3. Cultural meaning analysis: Using a hermeneutic approach, the meaning of the mantras was interpreted within the context of the Lamalera community's beliefs, values, and worldview.
4. Source and method triangulation: To ensure data validity, comparisons were made across informants and across methods (interview, observation, and documentation).

These analytical procedures follow the thematic domain analysis model proposed by Spradley (1979), which is widely used in linguistic ethnography to uncover meaning systems and symbolic structures embedded in community language practices.

Research Ethics

The study upheld principles of participatory research ethics. The researcher obtained permission from local customary leaders and community members, clarified the study's purpose and benefits, and respected each participant's right to refuse or withdraw at any point. All informants' names were anonymized to preserve confidentiality and protect their identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Thematic Classification of Traditional Mantras in Lamalera

Fieldwork revealed four dominant categories of mantras used in the Lamalera whale-hunting tradition. Each category is defined by the ritual context and social-spiritual function of the utterance during the different phases of the hunt.

Table 1. Classification of Mantras by Ritual Context and Function

No.	Type of Mantra	Timing of Utterance	Primary Function	Example of Ritual Expression
1	Opening Mantra	Before sailing	To request ancestral blessings and open spiritual access	<i>Tala o luli, ina puan lema</i>
2	Summoning Mantra	Upon sighting whales or mid-sea	To call fish/whales and boost collective morale	<i>ba'i lema, koteklema</i>
3	Protection Mantra	During ocean turbulence/threats	To seek protection from malevolent spirits or rough seas	<i>lolo bura naek, ata molan</i>
4	Gratitude Mantra	After a successful catch	To express thanksgiving and ancestral reverence	<i>Tuki tein, lamafa meze</i>

Linguistic Structure and Lexical Characteristics

The mantras exhibit distinct oral-poetic features, including repetition, parallelism, and metaphorical marine imagery. Syntax tends to be elliptical, with formulaic expressions that are memorized and chanted communally. Key lexical items are ritual-specific and rarely used in everyday Lamaholot speech. These include sacred nouns (*lamafa*, *peledang*), spiritual verbs (*tala*, *safa*), and indigenous metaphors for sea entities.

Table 2. Sample Lexical Items Found in Lamalera Mantras

Term	Gloss	Ritual Context
<i>Lamafa</i>	Whale harpooner	Mantra of offering
<i>Peledang</i>	Traditional whale-hunting boat	Opening and summoning
<i>Ina puan</i>	Ocean mother/spirit	Invocation and protection
<i>Tuki tein</i>	Returning life/soul	Gratitude and closure

Transmission and Preservation Status

Findings also indicate a declining intergenerational transmission of mantras. Older practitioners (ages 50+) still perform these mantras with high fidelity. However, younger generations are less familiar with their structure, meaning, and spiritual implications. The oral nature of these mantras, combined with the absence of formal documentation or schooling, has increased the risk of cultural and linguistic erosion.

Discussion

Mantras as Performative Speech and Sacred Action

The findings affirm that Lamalera mantras are not merely linguistic artifacts or decorative ritual chants, but are fundamentally performative utterances in the Austinian sense (Austin, 1962) that is, utterances that do not merely describe reality but enact it. Within the Lamalera whale-hunting tradition, each mantra is spoken not to inform or narrate, but to *do*: to summon, to protect, to authorize, to transform. Speaking a mantra is a ritual act in itself, embedded within a sacred event and functioning as a catalyst for collective spiritual mobilization. In this sense, the act of chanting becomes indistinguishable from the ritual itself what is done is inseparable from what is said.

This performativity is evident in the way mantras are timed with specific ritual actions: before sailing, as the boats are prepared; during the sighting of whales, as the community calls upon ancestral guidance; and after successful hunts, as expressions of gratitude and spiritual closure. These utterances transform physical actions such as rowing or harpooning into acts consecrated by ancestral legitimacy. Duranti (1997) argues that in such contexts, language takes on *illocutionary force* it becomes not merely symbolic but socially consequential. It both reflects and constitutes the shared belief system of the community, binding individuals into a moral and spiritual collective.

Furthermore, the triplet constructions, parallelism, and rhythmic formulas frequently found in Lamalera mantras strengthen their mnemonic and ceremonial power. These stylistic features align with Finnegan's (1977) conceptualization of oral poetry as a mechanism of cultural memory, used to preserve core values, cosmological narratives, and ritual instructions across generations. The repetition and parallel structures found in mantras such as "*Tala o luli, tala ba'i lema, tala fetu temola*" are not merely stylistic choices they serve to enhance spiritual resonance, stabilize transmission, and engage the collective psyche of the performers.

This aligns closely with Bauman's (1975) view of verbal art as a culturally framed performance, where both speaker and audience participate in a shared understanding of form, rhythm, and meaning. In Lamalera, this shared understanding is deeply spiritual: the utterance of a mantra invokes not only memories and meanings but entities ancestral spirits, guardians of the sea, mythic creatures that are believed to listen, respond, and act in turn.

Moreover, the physical setting in which these mantras are chanted open sea, sacred boats (*peledang*), collective silence before utterance intensifies the aura of sanctity. The moment of uttering is accompanied by embodied practices: rhythmic rowing, the holding of spears, the synchronized gaze of the crew. These mantras thus become multimodal performances, combining speech, gesture, posture, and intention, forming what Turner (1982) calls "ritual process," where symbolic communication enacts and renews communal structure.

In summary, Lamalera mantras illustrate how performative speech can function as sacred action, transforming linguistic utterance into an active vehicle for spiritual negotiation, cultural reproduction, and social regulation. Such utterances are neither ornamental nor optional—they are ritual technologies through which the community sustains its cosmology, asserts its ancestral links, and maintains harmony with the sea and its forces.

Lexical Sacrality and the Whorfian Hypothesis

The ritual language of Lamalera is characterized by a sacred lexicon a set of words deliberately chosen not only for their semantic content but for their cultural charge and cosmological resonance. Terms such as *tala* (to open, to initiate), *lema* (whale or sacred sea creature), and *molan* (ancestral spirit or guardian) are not ordinary words; they are linguistic vessels of spiritual authority. Their use is restricted to ritual contexts and often avoided in mundane conversation, signaling a form of lexical taboo that preserves their power.

This lexical sacrality illustrates what Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) famously proposed in his hypothesis: that language shapes habitual thought and reflects the categories through which speakers understand the world. In the case of Lamalera, the ritual lexicon encodes a worldview in which the sea is alive, ancestors remain active agents, and the survival of the community depends on harmony between words, spirits, and nature. Language here is not merely a tool for naming but a system for relating, invoking, and safeguarding the cosmic order.

For example, the invocation of *molan* in protection mantras is not a figurative appeal but a linguistic act of summoning. The very utterance is believed to awaken the presence of ancestral protectors. Such practices support the notion of semantic gateways that certain words are imbued with metaphysical properties, opening access to other realms of meaning and existence. This aligns with linguistic anthropologist Alessandro Duranti's (1997) view that language is not only representational but constitutive of social and spiritual reality.

Moreover, this linguistic coding is deeply culture-specific. Kramsch (1998) argues that every language embeds a culture-specific logic, a system of symbols that cannot be translated without losing nuance. In Lamalera, the word *lema* does not merely mean "whale" in the zoological sense it refers to a sacred being, a gift from the ancestors, and a test of communal worthiness. Such terms are thus saturated with layered meanings, what Hymes (1974) calls socio-symbolic systems that go beyond denotation and reflect the moral, ecological, and spiritual dimensions of a culture.

Importantly, these sacred lexemes are often performed rather than explained. Young Lamalera fishers may not be taught the literal meaning of *tala o luli*, but they know *when*, *how*, and *why* to say it demonstrating that knowledge of sacred language is as much embodied and procedural as it is semantic. This reinforces the idea that language functions as cultural praxis, not just as a system of signs.

In sum, the deliberate use of ritual-specific vocabulary in Lamalera is a linguistic strategy of preservation, invocation, and boundary marking. It separates the sacred from the profane, reinforces group identity, and encodes a cosmology in which language is a spiritual technology. This sacred lexicon, thus, is not just a set of words but a living archive of a people's relationship with the sea, the spirit world, and each other.

Cultural Erosion and Language Endangerment

The findings of this study underscore a pressing concern echoed across many indigenous and minority language contexts: the erosion of sacred linguistic traditions in the face of rapid socio-economic and cultural transformation. In the case of Lamalera, the traditional mantras once central to the community's ritual life and cosmological worldview are facing a slow but steady decline in use and transmission, particularly among younger generations. This situation resonates with Grenoble and Whaley's (2006) framework on language endangerment, which identifies urban migration, the absence of intergenerational transfer, and weak institutional reinforcement as key drivers of language attrition. While elder fishermen and ritual leaders in Lamalera continue to chant and preserve the mantras through oral tradition, there is no formal mechanism of documentation, education, or integration into local schooling or cultural preservation policies. The knowledge remains embodied and oral, making it highly susceptible to rupture when elders pass away or when younger individuals shift their identity aspirations toward more globalized or urbanized models of life.

Additionally, the symbolic shift from sacred usage to literary or aesthetic representation further indicates semantic erosion. As Widarsini (2021) observed, many of Lamalera's cultural and spiritual terms now appear more frequently in fictionalized or literary works such as novels and local folklore publications than in their original ritual contexts. This shift represents what Hinton (2001) terms "aesthetic appropriation", where the form of traditional language survives but is detached from its performative and cultural roots.

The presence of mantra in such symbolic media does not necessarily guarantee their survival, as it often lacks situated meaning, ritual authority, and communal embodiment. When mantras become static textual artifacts rather than dynamic oral acts, they lose their pragmatic and spiritual force. This process reflects broader patterns of semiotic dislocation, in which sacred utterances are emptied of their cultural vitality and instead become nostalgic or folkloric remnants.

Moreover, the absence of youth participation in ritual life whether due to migration, changing belief systems, or the demands of formal education contributes to a rupture in linguistic ecology. As Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) argues, linguistic genocide can occur not only through explicit banning of language use but also through the systemic neglect and marginalization of mother tongue transmission in favor of dominant or globalized languages.

In short, Lamalera's ritual language is not only endangered it is structurally vulnerable. Without concrete efforts in community-based documentation, intergenerational apprenticeship, and policy-level recognition, the mantras risk becoming archaeological language fossils: remembered, recorded, but no longer lived.

Ethnolinguistic Significance and Community Identity

Ultimately, the significance of Lamalera's mantras transcends the confines of religious ritual they function as multidimensional cultural instruments: identity markers, social regulators, intergenerational archives, and embodiments of indigenous epistemology. These sacred utterances are not simply spoken texts, but performative enactments of communal values, ancestral memory, and social cohesion.

In oral cultures like Lamalera, language is not merely a representational system it is a way of knowing and organizing life. As Ong (1982) famously asserted, orality constitutes a cognitive framework in traditional societies, where memory, ethics, history, and worldview are encoded and enacted through speech. Within this framework, mantras perform several critical ethnolinguistic roles. First, mantras act as identity markers. Their use is limited to those who belong to and are recognized by the Lamalera community, thus forming linguistic boundaries that distinguish insiders from outsiders. Mastery of mantra structure and appropriate context becomes a rite of passage and a form of cultural authentication.

Second, they serve as social organizers. The timing and content of the mantras are linked to communal roles whether one is a *lamafa* (harpooner), *ata molan* (spiritual guide), or a younger crew member. Each has a distinct relationship with the language of ritual. Through these utterances, community hierarchy, duty, and spiritual accountability are reinforced. This echoes Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital, where the mastery and appropriate deployment of specific registers of speech confer symbolic power within a community.

Third, these mantras function as vessels of indigenous knowledge. Embedded within them are ecological insights, cosmological structures, ethical codes, and collective historical consciousness. For instance, the metaphors used in protection mantras reflect an understanding of seasonal ocean behavior, interspecies relationships, and spiritual geography. In this sense, the mantras are not merely religious, but encyclopedic oral repositories of what anthropologists call *situated knowledge* (Haraway, 1988).

Furthermore, the communal chanting of mantras before and after whale hunts strengthens ancestral bonds, affirming the belief that each ritual action is part of a continuing lineage that connects the living with the departed. The sea, in this view, is not just a physical expanse but a spiritual landscape, where mantras act as bridges across time, space, and existence.

Thus, Lamalera's ritual language should be understood not as an isolated tradition, but as a living ethnolinguistic infrastructure one that upholds the identity of the community, encodes its cosmology, and orchestrates its social relations. Without these mantras, the Lamalera worldview would lose a vital expressive and organizing force.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that the traditional mantras of the Lamalera whaling community serve as linguistically sacred and culturally embedded oral texts that structure ritual performance, mediate

human–nature relationships, and transmit ancestral knowledge. The classification of mantras into four functional categories opening, summoning, protective, and thanksgiving demonstrates the highly structured and context-dependent nature of ritual speech within the Lamalera community.

Linguistically, the mantras exhibit formulaic and poetic features such as repetition, parallelism, and metaphor, which enhance their performative power and mnemonic function. The lexicon used is both culturally saturated and spiritually loaded, reflecting the community's worldview in which the sea, the ancestors, and human agency are closely intertwined. These findings reinforce the view that language in oral cultures is not merely a tool for communication, but a vessel for ontology, ethics, and ecological negotiation.

The study also underscores the urgent need for documentation and revitalization, as the intergenerational transmission of these mantras is increasingly fragile. Without deliberate efforts to preserve these oral traditions, there is a real risk of losing not only a unique linguistic repertoire but also an entire cosmological system rooted in maritime ritual life.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the field of ethnolinguistics by illustrating how ritual language functions as a performative and identity-building practice. It also reaffirms the importance of local epistemologies in global linguistic studies, emphasizing that indigenous oral genres are valuable sites for exploring the interplay between language, culture, and power.

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