Kui Minority Language and Identity in the Digital Age

Stefanie Siebenhütter[1]

Abstract—This article examines the online and offline media use of the Kui minority in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, focusing on their linguistic choices using social media. Without a writing system of their own, Kui speakers use majority languages for communication. The study explores the availability of media in Kui and the reasons for adopting national languages online. Findings highlight a desire for social inclusion while maintaining ethnic identity. Despite language shifts, Kui speakers persist in their cultural practices. This research challenges assumptions that language shift leads to cultural loss, showing how minorities navigate digital spaces without abandoning their heritages.

Keywords: Endangered Languages; Kui Ethnic Minority; Language Maintenance; Social Media; Thailand/Laos/Cambodia

Introducing the Kui Minority

The Southeast Asian mainland is home to numerous ethnic and linguistic minorities (e.g., Schliesinger 2000, 2017; Siebenhütter 2020, 2022, 2023). The Kuis,[2] the focus of this article, reside in the border region of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (e.g., Bos 2009; Keating 2013; Baird 2022).

Erik Seidenfaden's 1952 study, "The Kui People of Cambodia and Siam", was among their first Western ethnographic accounts, marking an early contribution to minority studies in the region. Since then, research on ethnic minorities has expanded significantly.

This article examines the development of minority research in Southeast Asia, focusing on the Kuis and their online and offline communication. It traces the evolution of scholarship on ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities, highlights efforts in language documentation and revitalization, and reviews past and emerging research on the Kuis and

[1] Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Email: ssiebenh@uni-mainz.de.

[2] The author is aware that the minority people under discussion use different names, e.g., Kuy or Kuay in Cambodia, or Suai, and so on, throughout Laos, and are often not aware of being participants in one ethno-linguistic group.

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other minority groups in the region. **Map 1** shows the regions with significant Kui, Kuay, Suai, etc. (กูย, กวย, ส่วย) populations in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. As of 2025, the Austro-Asiatic language is considered endangered, with an estimated total of between 10,000 and one million speakers.[3] The Kui minority in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia is estimated to number around 400,000 people, of which around 220,000 live in Thailand (Siebenhütter 2022: 10). They have little media and public presence; they have no written language—the Kuis, as with the respective national majority speakers, use Thai, Khmer, or Lao when they want to communicate in written language—thus there is no literature or social media page in Kui. It is difficult to provide exact numbers of people identified as belonging to this minority group as all the latest published figures are extrapolations (Siebenhütter 2020, 2023).

As with much of mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand has experienced migrations, resettlements, and shifting national borders, contributing to a highly diverse cultural and linguistic landscape. Research on minorities in Cambodia (Grabowsky 2004; Schliesinger 2011; Swift 2013), Vietnam (Engelbert 2016), Laos (Baird 2015), and Thailand demonstrates how factors such as climate change, political transitions, and colonial legacies have shaped this complexity. European colonization—particularly in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos—along with interactions with traders, diplomats, and missionaries, led to some of the earliest studies of minority groups in the region (e.g., Grabowsky 2010; Ivarsson & Sing 2022). U.S. military research also contributed, notably Schrock's *Minority Groups in Thailand* (1970), which documented Kui self-identification as "Kui" (meaning "men") and alternative names or spellings such as Kuoy, Kuy, Koui, and Soai or Souai, etc., particularly among non-Kui speakers. My fieldwork in northeast Thailand confirmed the preference for "Kui" among speakers themselves, leading me to adopt this term here.

The study explores Kui digital and offline language use, analyzing their social media presence and linguistic choices. It considers the factors influencing their use of majority languages such as Thai, Khmer, Lao, and English in daily communication while also highlighting their aspirations for social inclusion and the resilience of Kui identity and cultural practices. Finally, it discusses the growing role of digital media in shaping minority language survival, underscoring implications for the future of minority communities in Thailand and beyond.

Data Collection and Research Process

During multiple field research trips between 2014 and 2021 to Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, I explored the cultures and languages of the region, with a particular focus on the ethnic and linguistic minorities, especially the Kuis. The primary data collection for this research took place between 2019 and 2021, during which I gathered ethnographic and sociolinguistic data from Kui speakers. Fieldwork was conducted primarily in three Kui villages in northeast Thailand: Ban Kanhloeng (บ้าน กันล่วง) in Sikhoraphum district of

[3] See: https://www.ethnologue.com/language/kdt/ (accessed 19 February 2025).

Map 1: Regions with significant Kui, Kuay, and Suai populations in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia © Thomson Walt

Surin province; Ban Khinak (บ้าน ขี้นาค) in Prang Ku district of Sisaket province; and Phu Sing (ภูสิงห์) in Phu Sing district, also in Sisaket province **[Map 2]**.

"Offline" data collection included ethnographic fieldwork and one-on-one interviews with Kui speakers in their villages. I also participated in several Kui rituals and festive activities throughout Surin province. Additionally, group interviews were held in Sisaket and Surin provinces in Thai and English. In some cases, two Kui research assistants facilitated introductions and initial

Map 2: Field sites in Surin and Sisaket provinces in northeast Thailand © Monika Feinen

contacts in the villages. Over 200 short questionnaires—administered both online and in paper form between 2019 and 2020—provided insights into participants' daily communication habits, offline media use, digital engagement, and social media preferences. These responses also offered demographic data, which allowed for an evaluation of media usage patterns by residence and age cohort.

"Online" data collection examined the presence of Kui minorities on social media in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Three methods were used: (1) interviews with Kui individuals in Cambodia and Thailand via Facebook, (2) questionnaires focusing on their language preferences in digital communication, and (3) online research on Kui social media presence and interactions. While the study initially aimed to also include the Kuis in Laos, I was unable to establish contact with native speakers via social media during the COVID pandemic. Therefore, the research primarily analyzed their online activity on platforms such as Facebook (including Messenger), WhatsApp, KakaoTalk, and smaller private blogs in Thai and Khmer. Additional interviews were conducted via email and social media in Thai and English, with some recorded and transcribed for analysis.

As a result of this study, an interview guide was developed for future in-depth studies on the digital use of minority languages, which is available upon request. In the following sections, I present a selection of illustrative responses from speakers and provide supplementary examples from social media and online content of the Kuis.

Rituals, Practices, and the Oral Tradition of Minorities

Like many minorities in Southeast Asia, northeast Thai Kuis possess a rich heritage of rituals, practices, legends, and myths that have been passed down through both written and oral traditions (Seidenfaden 1952; Siebenhütter 2022, 2023). To date, Kui speakers do not have a distinct writing system. Like other minority groups without indigenous scripts, Kui people rely on majority languages for written communication. In Thailand, they use Thai, while in Laos and Cambodia, they may use Lao or Khmer in daily conversations, such as in markets, homes, or neighboring villages. Most members of minority groups are multilingual, acquiring multiple languages either from their parents or when they enter the education system, which is dominated by the national language (Siebenhütter 2023).

This multilingualism extends beyond language to encompass religious and cultural practices, which have developed over centuries due to the region's long history of cultural exchange and language contact (e.g., Holt 2009; Siebenhütter 2019, 2021). Indian (South Asian) influence is evident in the religious life of Thailand. As Holt (2009) argues for Laos, the general knowledge of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is deeply influenced by indigenous religious cultures, particularly the worship of spirits believed to govern specific social and geographical areas. Kuis exemplify the enduring influence of traditional spiritual cults on culture and society, as well as the integration of Buddhist temple and ritual practices into daily life.

Kuis are well known for wild elephant catching and are also mentioned as the last generation of elephant "doctors" in Thailand (Alisa 2025). Furthermore, they have been known for their skills as ironworkers and ironsmiths for centuries (Dupaigne 2016), a tradition that may have been influenced by Hindu civilization, as Seidenfaden suggests from their use of "Brahmanical rites and incantations" (1952: 149). Dupaigne (2016) also notes that weaving, a craft practiced by various ethnic groups in the region, was historically important among the Kuis.[4]

Media Representation of the Kui Minority

None of the Kuis interviewed during the 2019 fieldwork were aware of any newspapers or books in Kui, which is not surprising given the lack of a proper writing system. No radio or television programs could be named either. However, at least until July 2020, one Kui speaker from Buriram province, near the border with Cambodia, used a YouTube channel to teach Kui using the Thai alphabet (see details below).

In mainstream print and online media in Thailand and Cambodia, occasional articles address the land and

[4] The artistry of textiles and weaving is further explored in Siebenhütter 2022.

forest rights of the Kuis, who see themselves as displaced from their habitat due to construction projects. Similar disputes can be found outside Southeast Asia as well; for example, critical reports questioning the legitimacy of land rights can be found in Europe, such as in Norway (Laakso et al. 2016).

On social media, such as YouTube in Thailand, Kuis are regularly portrayed as an endangered minority, multilingual in the older generations, and at risk of extinction due to the lack of language transmission to younger generations. However, some younger Kuis, aged about 40 and under, organize into small groups on social media in both Thailand and Cambodia to announce events or share pictures. Communication on these platforms typically occurs in Thai or Khmer. Younger Kuis, between 15 and 24 years old, report familiarity with pop songs that are hardly distinguishable from modern Thai pop music. These songs express a modern minority culture rather than the cultivation of native folklore (Siebenhütter 2023). Pop music can significantly influence the linguistic repertoire, motivating speakers to linguistically (e.g., lexically) identify with geographically distant groups, such as listeners in southern Laos who enjoy Thai popular music.

The omission of mentions of Kuis as a minority in the media does not necessarily carry a negative connotation. Avoiding topics relevant to minorities can sometimes indicate such good integration that the minority does not require specific media attention, as described by Laakso et al. (2016) regarding the Hungarian minority in Austria. However, it may also suggest that minority members refrain from raising critical issues to avoid being associated with groups that have lower social status or are seen as troublemakers, as sometimes portrayed in the majority media. If all media are state-controlled, as in Laos and Cambodia, reports are often aligned with government priorities.[5]

In general, the majority media's portrayal of minorities, including the Kuis in northeast Thailand, often avoids addressing serious conflicts, such as minority land rights in the "Emerald Triangle" where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia meet. As a result, many minorities, including the Kuis, may prefer to remain quiet and invisible, maintaining harmony at the cost of their rights. Although the Kui individuals I interviewed did not report significant difficulties, some admitted to hiding their heritage to avoid identification as poor provincial residents. Such actions may not only impact Kui individuals but also others from northeast Thailand.

Challenges faced by minority language speakers are common not only in Thailand but also in other parts of the world. While the situation in Europe cannot be directly compared, research outcomes regarding minorities in Sweden and Norway are instructive. As with the Kuis, these minorities are in competition with the major populations and their languages. Kuis face similar rivalry not only from the central Thai population but also from other minorities in northeast Thailand, such as Khmer, Lao (Isan–Lao), and smaller ethnic groups. Laakso et al. describe

[5] See Laakso et al. 2016 on the situation of Veps and Karelian minorities in Russia.

political grievances related to the attention given to minorities, using the example of the Sámi, Meänkieli, and Kven minorities in Sweden and Norway:

> The wrongdoings of the past and assimilationist policies have led to the current situation, where many minority language speakers have lost their heritage language and may even be ashamed of their ethnic roots. The majority media reflects on this and places responsibility on the majority (2016: 199).

In Thailand, several minorities are losing their heritage languages due to political decisions, such as education policies that make it difficult for children to learn their ethnic languages. Minority languages are often not taught in schools and the shame and fear of exclusion contribute to this loss, as is the case for the Kuis. These feelings are frequently cited as reasons why minority languages are not used on social media platforms (Belmar 2020).

My research supports Guillem Belmar's findings, showing that minority speakers in urban areas such as Bangkok fear being looked down upon by those from wealthier regions. For example, one Kui male who moved to Bangkok reported that he tries to avoid being identified as someone from the "poor northeast of Thailand" or as a member of the Kui minority unless it is absolutely necessary. This tendency may be even stronger when parents and grandparents model majority behaviors in hopes of providing the best opportunities for their children.

Maintenance and Revitalization of Minority Languages

As is common in mainland Southeast Asia, a single national language is typically employed to promote national identity and unity. This is often supported by a language policy designed to promote and develop that language. However, indigenous ethnic and immigrant minority groups may be marginalized, leading to a decline in the use of their languages (Bradley 2019a). Political objectives repeatedly seek to emphasize the unity of the nation, supported by the ideology of one nation carrying a singular national identity.

Apart from private initiatives on social media, there are no official efforts in Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia to revitalize and maintain the Kui language. However, efforts such as producing books and other materials to educate in minority languages have been made for some other languages in southern Thailand, as noted by researchers at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia at Mahidol University in Bangkok (e.g., Suwilai 2006; Sumittra 2013). Furthermore, bilingual education work has been conducted with the Hmong in Chiang Rai province (Suwilai 2006). Compared to other minority languages in Thailand, Kui still retains a relatively high number of active speakers; however, as mentioned in the introduction, it is marked as endangered. Additionally, researchers continue to study the rituals and practices of minorities and

are engaged in further investigations into endangered languages, focusing on their documentation, revitalization, maintenance, preservation, and education (e.g., Suwilai 2018; Bradley 2019b).

Digital Participation and the Extinction of Minority Languages Online

Though a significant number of minorities are present in Thailand, the use of social media by linguistic minorities has received comparatively little attention in previous research. Generally, lesser-known and especially unwritten languages cannot be used directly in online communication. In many cases, this is due to availability issues, forcing users to adopt one of the major languages supported by social media platforms. When minority language speakers wish to participate using a language without a proper writing system, they must resort to other writing systems. Furthermore, minority languages with their own writing systems are rarely used in online communication. Researchers have traced the reasons for such developments in minority speakers in Europe, such as Frisian (Belmar 2020).

In terms of minority participation in online communication and social media, Belmar & Heyen (2021) show that participation can still take place without written or spoken language, for example, through videos, pictures, voice messages, and other alternatives; they argue that written language is just one medium. Therefore, the absence of a writing system or the unavailability of a minority language on specific platforms like Facebook or YouTube does not entirely exclude minorities. However, it would be naive to assume that all online activities can be conducted without the use of language. If members of a minority wish to participate in any way, they must still use a language at least for account registration, website dashboard menus, etc., and these are almost never minor languages like Lao or Khmer, even though they are national languages, let alone minority languages like Kui, Pacoh, or So. Moreover, translation software that delivers satisfactory results is not available for minority languages.

While social media use has seen a notable rise across Southeast Asia in recent years,[6] not all languages are represented equally. In the digital domain, some minority languages are not represented at all. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon. Firstly, only available language options can be used; if certain languages are not offered, they cannot be selected. Secondly, the speakers themselves determine which languages they use in the digital domain; this decision is influenced by factors beyond their linguistic abilities. Many factors impact the choice of a *lingua franca*, such as English, the majority language of the target group (e.g., Thai), or an unwritten variation or dialect of a minority language.

While some research on the use of social media by European minority languages has been conducted by scholars such as Belmar (2018, 2020), Belmar & Glass (2019), and Belmar & Heyen (2021), there is relatively little research available on Southeast Asian minorities'

[6] From January 2017 to January 2018, Thailand observed an 11% increase in social media users (Chaffey 2024). Since that time, the number of users has undoubtedly increased significantly (Kemp 2024).

online presence and social media use (Siebenhütter 2022). The primary reasons for not using a minority language on social media were identified by Belmar and colleagues in an online survey of 259 participants representing 54 different native languages, including 76.8% minority speakers. According to Belmar (2018: 18, 2020), the reasons for non-use included fear of being misunderstood by friends who do not speak the minority language (64.9%), lack of knowledge regarding the correct way to write in the minority language (13.5%), fear of embarrassment due to mistakes (20.3%), lack of fluency (27%), and preference for another language (12.2%).

In his 2013 study, András Kornai traces the digital decline and subsequent resurgence of a language. As a language dies in the digital age, its functionality is gradually lost, affecting all areas of communication, from daily interactions via SMS and email to online commerce. The loss of prestige is evident in the most literal sense: a language not available online is effectively nonexistent. This means that digital natives do not develop digital skills in their native language. In contrast, the digital rise of a language represents a process in which the language gains more digital functions and prestige, while its speakers develop increasing digital skills.

Although many languages appear to be well-preserved in the analog world, over 95% of all languages have not yet been digitized (Kornai 2013). The most crucial indicator of a language's vitality in the analog world is the size and generational composition of its community. In the digital domain, however, the key factor is the number of individuals exposed to digital technology from an early age. Once a language community starts creating content through text messages, blogs, and wikis, it can be reasonably assumed that younger generations will follow suit. Subsequently, digital forums such as Facebook are likely to be used by parents and grandparents to maintain communication with their children. Passive consumption of digital material in a common language is irrelevant and potentially detrimental to the survival of an endangered language. Furthermore, passive web presence can be distinguished from active web presence. The former is indicative of preservation efforts, while the latter represents digital vitality.

To more precisely calculate the share of different languages in the total content of the Internet, Pimienta et al. (2009), among others, are working on methods to determine the relative power of a language using various indicators. These include software downloads, the number of users on certain social media platforms, and Wikipedia usage. "No Wikipedia, no ascent", sums up Kornai (2013: 3) regarding the importance of this knowledge platform. A language that is not used on major online platforms like Wikipedia is unlikely to play a significant role in the future. As of June 2024, Wikipedia lists 316 active language versions. Kui is not represented on Wikipedia, along with many other minority languages in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Kornai (2013: 9) estimates that no more than a third of the languages that existed when Wikipedia was founded in January 2001 will make the transition to the digital age.

According to the latter, digital advancement requires the use of a

language in a variety of digital contexts. The survival of a language in the digital age is essentially blocked for local language variants whose speakers had already ceded two critical areas to dominant languages by the time of the industrial revolution: prestige and core functional areas. Moreover, a large number of speakers does not necessarily equate to a large web presence. For example, Piedmontese has around two million speakers but very little web presence, while Faroese, with only 50,000 speakers, boasts a high-quality Wikipedia presence (Kornai 2013: 9).

Out of the 7,000 languages believed to still be alive, Kornai (2013: 10) predicts that perhaps 2,500 will survive another century in the traditional sense, with only 10% of these surviving digitally. The rest will either become digital heritage (like Nynorsk) or face digital extinction (like Mandinka). In the context of a 12-year study on linguistic diversity on the Internet (Pimienta, Prado & Blanco 2009), the frequency of languages in online searches and the ratio compared to the use of English were examined. Both software and operating systems are usually only available in English or other major languages.

A common method of assessing the appropriateness of online content for a certain population and the state of linguistic diversity worldwide is to compare the estimated number of Internet users who speak a language with the estimated percentage of websites available in that language. More than 50% of all web content is provided in English, yet only 25% of all Internet users speak English. Pimienta et al. (2009) question the accuracy of this common method of recording languages on the Internet.

There is an overall research gap on minority languages in the digital world. The majority of research on language in the context of social media focuses on major languages (e.g., Tagg & Seargeant 2015). Studies on minority groups in Thailand and Laos and their use of social media have mainly concentrated on healthcare (e.g., Haenssgen, Nutcha & Zanello 2021) or language documentation (Siripen et al. 2021). Others examine the connection between identity and language and their representation on platforms like Facebook and Twitter (e.g., Bolander 2017) and, more broadly, linguistic diversity and multilingualism in online communication (e.g., Leppänen, Kytölä & Westinen 2017).

Kui Online Presence, Social Media Use, and Online Communication

Interviews and questionnaires indicate that Kui language is not widely used in social media and online communication. Kui has no Wikipedia page (as there is no Kui script, but also no page in Kui using Thai, Lao, or Khmer script), nor are there language options in platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, or other services. However, Kui speakers do use Facebook and other messenger services, commonly accessed by the Thai population, using Thai, English, and sometimes other languages such as Khmer. According to recent data and my own observations, Facebook remains highly popular in Thailand, with a penetration rate of around 91% in the third quarter of 2023. With 50

Figure 1: Screenshots of Kui World's Day (วันกูยโลก) social media banner, 9-10 March 2019 © Kui Association/Facebook

million Facebook users in Thailand that year, the platform is the leading social media network in the country. Additionally, Thailand ranks among the top social media users in Southeast Asia, with other platforms like the Japanese service LINE also widely used (Kemp 2024).

Surveys on Kui social media use, conducted between Fall 2018 and Summer 2020, show a strong preference for online platforms. Even though Kui people rank as one of the lowest-income social groups in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, they use social media at levels comparable to other socioeconomic groups.

Kui speakers are aware of their minority status in the three countries and many organize online to stay connected with other Kui members across the region. These virtual interactions often lead to in-person meetings and festivals, such as "Kui World's Day" (วันกุ้ยโลก) in Ban Taklang (บ้าน ตากลาง), Tha Tum district, Surin province, in Thailand **[Figure 1]**, and the "Kui Cultural Festival Cambodia–Thailand–Lao" in Pal Hal Village (ភូមិប៉ាលហាល), Krong Preah Vihear, in Cambodia **[Figure 2]**.

However, communication within these groups typically happens in Thai, which serves as a *lingua franca* for Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Even though Kui speakers, especially those under 40, are active on social media, most posts are in Thai or Khmer. This is because, through exposure to Thai media, a significant portion of Khmer and Lao speakers, particularly in border areas, understand Thai well and often speak it fluently. Thai speakers, in contrast, do not have the same level of understanding or fluency in Lao or Khmer. For instance, a Kui from northern Cambodia may communicate with a Kui co-organizer in Thailand using Thai via Facebook to plan a joint Kui festival, as Thai is the most

Figure 2: Screenshot of "Kui Cultural Festival Cambodia–Thailand–Lao" announcement in Khmer and English, 21 January 2020 © Kui Tak/Facebook

accessible language for both parties. Kui dialects vary significantly across villages and, while proficiency in Kui is not uniform, Thai is the preferred regional medium for communication.

A similar pattern was observed in northeast Thailand, where a married Kui couple from Surin province, despite their strong ties to Kui heritage, often switched to Thai when speaking to each other. Their explanation was that it was simply faster and easier to communicate in Thai, which everyone spoke fluently due to its necessity in daily life. While Kui language proficiency varied between them, Thai provided a common foundation for communication. Additionally, the Facebook group "The Kui People Association of Thailand" (ชมรมชาวกูยแห่งประเทศไทย)[7] has become a popular online forum for Kui speakers, and the group "Kui Tak" (កួយតាក),[8] maintained by Kui speakers in Cambodia, had 2,517 followers in February 2025 **[Figure 3]**.

Kui speakers generally take pride in their ethnic identity. As I have observed (Siebenhütter 2022: 182–183), they often proudly affirm their heritage, with some explicitly noting their ancestral roots in Kui–Kui wedding traditions. However, younger Kui speakers, such as a group of schoolgirls in Ubon Ratchathani province, may occasionally downplay their ethnic background to avoid ridicule. However, a young Kui speaker from Buriram province even ran a YouTube channel dedicated to teaching Kui **[Figure 4]**.[9]

[7] See: https://www.facebook.com/THEKUIASSOCIATION/ (accessed 18 February 2025).

[8] See: https://www.facebook.com/kuitakpage/ (accessed 18 February 2025).

[9] *Swatsh Ayaze* channel with 315 subscribers on 18 February 2025. See: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXBfL6gm8IRu12Zb1Cwtndw.

Figure 3: Homepage of the Facebook group "Kui Tak", 18 February 2025
© Kui Tak/Facebook

Some Kui speakers also write Kui using Thai and Khmer characters on Facebook. A recent analysis of 95 comments in English, Khmer, and Thai scripts from a social media discussion about the Kui language revealed the following insights:

1. 20 comments offered new insights or personal opinions, such as "It is the responsibility of parents and elders to maintain their customs and language", and "I am a Kui from Preah Vihear province in Cambodia, and I really want to meet Kui people from Surin and Sisaket".
2. 37 comments, including 16 positive remarks like "I love Khmer" and "I am Kui from Surin province, Thailand; I'm proud to be Kui", often included personal assessments or comparisons with other languages.
3. Three comments addressed issues related to land rights for Kui people in Cambodia and Thailand, a frequent topic in discussions about ethnic minority rights in the border regions (Keating 2013).
4. 14 comments, some of which were offensive, had little relevance to the video content, with some relating to Thai politics.

In summary, a significant proportion of Kui people are active in social media and online communication, using Thai, Lao, and Khmer, alongside English, to communicate online. In daily life, when Kui or another minority language is not an option, they typically use these larger regional or national

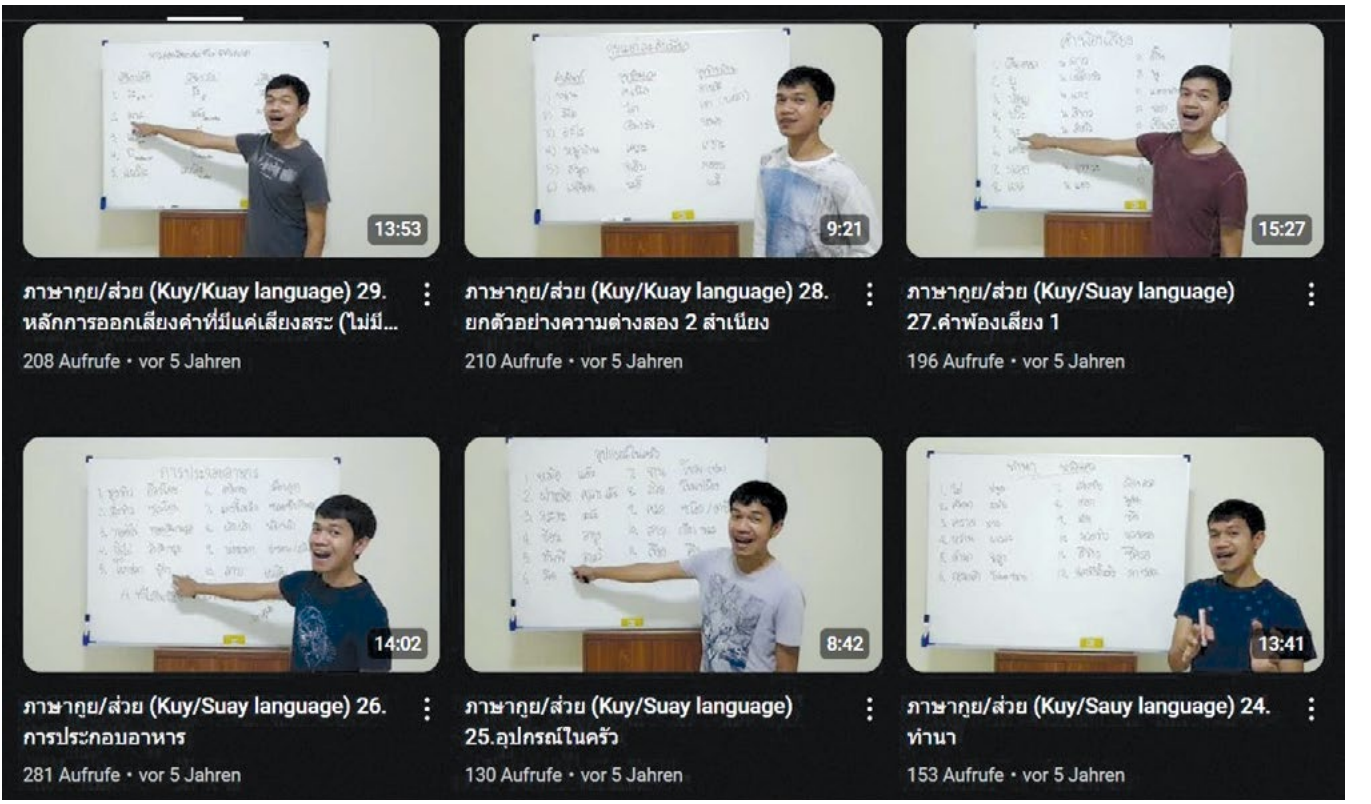

Figure 4: Screenshots of Kui teaching on YouTube channel *Swatch Ayaze*, 18 February 2025 © *Swatch Ayaze*/YouTube

languages. There is a clear interest in preserving Kui heritage, with many expressing a desire for a dedicated Kui alphabet to support their cultural legacy. However, following Kornai's (2013) predictions for the survival of minority languages in the digital age, the future of Kui in digital communication appears uncertain—along with that of many other minor languages.

The idea that the loss of a language inevitably means the demise of its culture, however, should be approached with caution. While the decline of a language is often seen as indicative of cultural decline (Schulze 2010), this view is too simplistic and does not always reflect the complex relationship between language, identity, and culture.

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The discussion in this article covered the general patterns of offline and online communication as well as the spread of Kui minority media. It also explored speakers' attitudes toward both minority (Kui) and majority languages (mainly Thai) and the reasons behind their language choices in social media and other online communication. Among the factors influencing language

choice, social goals, and the desire for life improvement (e.g., finding work, social inclusion, and a sense of belonging) were found to be significant. More often, the lack of online availability of the minority language was cited as a reason for choosing Thai, Lao, Khmer, or English in online communication and social media activities. The presence of minority languages in online communication and social media has been underresearched, but preliminary findings suggest that increasing digitalization—the effects of which are already becoming apparent—could have a detrimental impact on linguistic diversity.

In the case of the Kui (Kuay or Suai) populations in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, the widespread use of national languages for online and offline participation does not lead to an immediate loss of their minority identity and culture. However, the use of minority languages in online communication is generally less frequent than the use of dominant languages; this is not uncommon for Kuis.

Regarding attitudes toward the use of minority languages on social media, I found that these attitudes were predominantly pragmatic for the Kuis, with speakers adhering to economic principles. In other words, speakers use what is understood and prefer what is easiest to implement. Speakers rarely, if ever, evaluate their language choices, at least in conversation.

In conclusion, Seidenfaden's 1952 observations do not require a radically new direction over the past 70 years. While the Kui language has not completely died out, ethnic Kui people in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia are increasingly shifting toward the use of Thai, Lao, or Khmer in everyday life. Not all Kui speakers are fluent in their mother tongue and some do not even speak it at all. Thus, Seidenfaden's conclusion that "They [the Kuis in Thailand] are fast becoming Thai in language and culture" (1952: 180) remains a fitting description of Kui life, with the caveat that language loss or shift does not necessarily result in the loss of minority identity and culture.

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