

Lexical Comparison Between Older and Younger Speakers of the Kayan Ethnic Group in Sungai Asap, Belaga, Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the lexical similarities and differences between older and younger Kayan speakers in Sungai Asap, Belaga, Sarawak. The study pursues two primary objectives: (i) to compare the extent of lexical retention and lexical variation in the basic vocabulary used by older and younger Kayan speakers based on Morris Swadesh's 200-word word list; and (ii) to identify the social factors influencing lexical change across generations. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed, supported by lexicostatistical analysis. Linguistic data were collected through structured interviews with native Kayan speakers representing two generational groups and were analysed using Swadesh's Lexicostatistical Theory (1952) alongside Fishman's Theory of Language Maintenance and Language Shift (1991). The findings indicate that a substantial proportion of the traditional Kayan basic vocabulary has been retained across generations, reflecting the continued vitality of the language within the community. Nevertheless, lexical differences were identified among younger speakers, particularly through lexical replacement, borrowing from Standard Malay, Sarawak Malay, and Iban, as well as minor phonological variation. The study further reveals that multilingual interaction, formal education, interethnic communication, and socioeconomic mobility are the principal social factors contributing to lexical change. Despite these influences, the Kayan language remains actively maintained within family and community domains, demonstrating a strong level of linguistic resilience and cultural continuity. The findings contribute to the documentation of indigenous languages in Sarawak and provide empirical evidence supporting ongoing language maintenance and revitalisation initiatives.

Keywords: Kayan language; lexical comparison; language maintenance; lexical change; Swadesh List; sociolinguistics; indigenous languages; Sarawak

INTRODUCTION

Language functions as a fundamental tool of communication that shapes social interaction and constructs cultural identity within a community. In Malaysia's multilingual setting, linguistic diversity is a defining characteristic of society, where multiple languages and dialects coexist and interact within daily communication practices (Tamiliarasi & Khairul, 2022). In Sarawak, this diversity is particularly prominent, with a

wide range of indigenous languages and dialects reflecting the cultural and ethnic complexity of its population (Abdul Wahab et al., 2020). These linguistic varieties serve not only as communicative systems but also as symbols of identity, heritage, and social belonging transmitted across generations.

The Kayan community in Sungai Asap, Belaga, represents one of the indigenous groups experiencing ongoing linguistic change due to shifting sociocultural conditions. Following relocation linked to the Bakun Hydroelectric Dam project, the Kayan community now exists within a multilingual environment where increased interaction with other ethnic groups and dominant languages such as Sarawak Malay, Standard Malay, and Iban has become part of daily life. This multilingual setting has contributed to changes in language use patterns, particularly among younger speakers, who are increasingly exposed to formal education, media influence, and interethnic communication.

Within this community, a clear generational distinction can be observed in language competence and usage patterns. Older speakers, defined operationally as individuals aged 50 years and above, were primarily raised in more homogeneous linguistic environments and continue to use Kayan as their dominant language in everyday communication, particularly within family and community domains. They are regarded as custodians of traditional lexical forms, preserving linguistic structures that reflect earlier stages of the language (Labov, 1972; UNESCO, 2003).

In contrast, younger speakers, aged between 15 and 49 years, experience a more dynamic and multilingual linguistic environment. Their language use is influenced by formal education, digital media, and interethnic interaction, which expose them to dominant languages such as Malay and Iban. According to Wolfram's (1969) perspective on language maturation, this group is at a stage where linguistic behaviour is highly flexible, often resulting in lexical borrowing, code-switching, and phonological variation.

The linguistic differences between these two generational groups form the basis of this study, which focuses on identifying and analysing lexical variation within the Kayan language. Specifically, the study adopts Morris Swadesh's 200-word list as a primary instrument for comparing basic vocabulary across generations. The Swadesh List is widely recognised in linguistic research for its ability to measure lexical retention and language stability due to its focus on basic, culturally neutral vocabulary items.

Despite the usefulness of this instrument, previous studies on the Kayan language remain limited, particularly those focusing on systematic lexical comparison between generations. Existing research has largely emphasised broader sociolinguistic themes such as language attitudes, language use, and cultural identity, rather than detailed lexical analysis. This highlights a significant gap in empirical documentation of intergenerational lexical change within the Kayan community.

In response to this gap, this study is conducted with two main objectives: first, to examine the level of lexical similarity and variation between older and younger Kayan speakers using the Swadesh 200-word list; and second, to identify the social factors influencing lexical change across generations. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to contribute to the documentation of indigenous languages in Sarawak and provide empirical evidence of language maintenance and shift within a multilingual community setting.

The findings of this study are expected to have both theoretical and practical

significance. Theoretically, it contributes to sociolinguistic understanding of lexical change in minority languages by integrating Fishman's theory of language maintenance and shift with lexicostatistical analysis. Practically, it provides useful linguistic data that may support future language preservation efforts, particularly in documenting and maintaining the Kayan language as part of Sarawak's intangible cultural heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language choice, lexical transmission, and structural modifications within minority speech communities are deeply influenced by changing social environments, domain pressures, and interethnic contact. This study integrates sociolinguistic theory with comparative corpus analysis to evaluate the lexical stability of the Kayan language in Sungai Asap.

The theoretical foundation of this research is rooted in sociolinguistics, which explores the direct relationship between language and society. Fishman (1991) posits that language change and eventual shift are heavily driven by macro-structural transitions within a community, such as geographical displacement, formal education, and cultural contact. Vocabulary represents the most volatile component of a language system, directly reflecting changes in a speaker's social reality. Conversely, Morris Swadesh (1952) argues that a community's core vocabulary, covering universal human concepts such as anatomical terms, natural elements, and primary pronouns, exhibits a high degree of historical stability. However, contemporary historical and descriptive linguistics demonstrate that under continuous external linguistic pressure, even this core basic vocabulary undergoes noticeable modifications (Crowley & Bown, 2010). When younger generations diminish their active usage of a mother tongue, the intergenerational transmission cycle is broken, exposing the heritage language to rapid structural attrition (Crystal, 2000).

Empirical research in Malaysia indicates that minority languages face severe existential pressure when navigating a highly dominant "linguistic marketplace" (David & Dealwis, 2010). In such environments, external languages associated with socioeconomic mobility and formal institutional structures increasingly restrict the mother tongue to highly limited, informal domestic domains managed primarily by older custodians. Psycholinguistically, younger generations are prone to introducing lexical innovations, modifying phonetic shapes, or substituting traditional terms with loanwords from contact codes to express modern social identities, while the older generation acts restoratively to preserve archaic forms (Trudgill, 2002). This generational divergence is highly evident in Sarawak, where ethnic languages are undergoing rapid, systemic shifts in daily usage patterns across demographic strata. Furthermore, historical and geopolitical disruptions, such as government-led resettlement projects and subsequent interethnic assimilation, create complex linguistic landscapes that accelerate the breakdown of traditional vocabulary in Borneo (Asmah Haji Omar, 2008).

To objectively quantify these internal changes, the 200-item Swadesh List functions as a reliable diagnostic instrument, enabling researchers to map structural distance, vocabulary retention, phonological variation, or total lexical replacement within a speech community (Crowley & Bown, 2010). Locally, this comparative tool has been successfully deployed to isolate phonetic and lexical variations across regional varieties, such as Sarawak Malay dialects (Mohd Zulkanien Sarbini, 2025). However, while prior

regional research relies on the Swadesh framework to map dialectal distribution across geographical lines, this study utilizes it to measure sociolinguistics stratification, examining the intergenerational gap between younger and older speakers within the same geographical community.

The critical need for this study is highlighted by the high ectolinguistical diversity of Sarawak, where indigenous minority languages face immediate threats due to a reliance on Malay and other regional codes among younger generations (Abdullah, 2023). Social contact frequently manifests as noticeable phonological deviations and lexical attrition across Sarawak's indigenous landscape (Asmah & Norazuna, 2020). While macro-level studies confirm these broad shifts across multiple ethnic groups, there remains a distinct shortage of micro-level, empirical data mapping the precise structural mutations within the Kayan language. Dialectological research confirms that understanding linguistic variation in Sarawak requires localized, empirical corpus data at the lexical stage (Md Adam & Abdullah, 2023).

To capture these dynamics, this study establishes a unified conceptual framework showing how intergenerational lexical change is determined by the interplay between three variables: external social factors (formal education, social mobility, interethnic socialization, and digital media), domains of language use (the structural contraction or retention of Kayan within family and community networks), and internal mechanisms of lexical modification (borrowing, total replacement, and phonological variation).

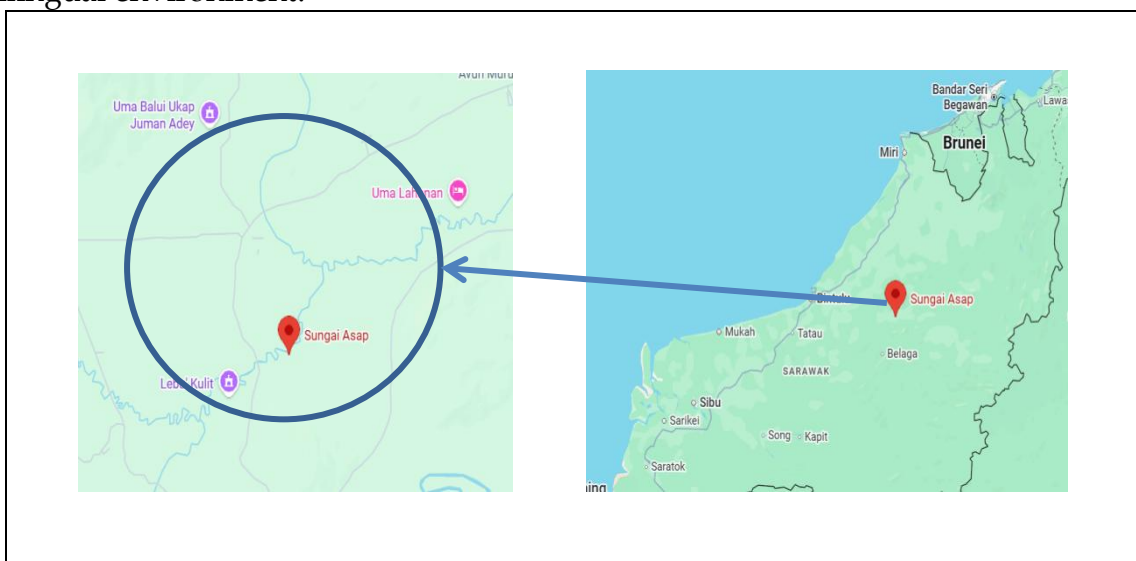
Ultimately, this study addresses a critical academic gap. Prior research heavily favors macro-sociolinguistic dimensions like language attitudes and broad vitality assessments, leaving systematic, corpus-based intergenerational vocabulary comparisons largely unexamined. Existing Kayan research remains heavily historical or generalized. By deploying a globally standardized diagnostic instrument to isolate semantic adjustments between older and younger cohorts, this study provides a concrete, empirical baseline for Kayan language documentation and ongoing cultural preservation initiatives in Sarawak.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in Fishman's Domain Theory (1972) and Theory of Language Maintenance and Language Shift (1991), which posits that language choice and lexical continuity are shaped by specific social domains such as family, education, employment, and interethnic interaction. Each domain carries distinct social expectations that influence speakers' linguistic decisions, directly affecting how vocabulary is either retained or altered. In this study, the retention of traditional Kayan vocabulary versus the adoption of loanwords or structural replacements is analysed according to how these external social factors restrict or expand native language domains. The framework is further supported by Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (1973), which explains how younger speakers adjust their language, specifically through lexical borrowing and code-mixing, according to the social context, multilingual environment, and interlocutor identity within the resettlement ecology. It also draws on Morris Swadesh's Lexicostatistical Theory (1952) to provide the quantitative mechanism for measuring the precise structural retention or divergence within the core lexicon, highlighting the interplay between community displacement, interethnic contact, and the sustainability of heritage languages.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design supported by lexicostatistical analysis to obtain objective and measurable empirical data regarding vocabulary retention. A structured 200-word Swadesh List, introduced by Morris Swadesh (1952), serves as the primary instrument of data collection. It was utilized during structured interviews with native Kayan informants residing in the Sungai Asap resettlement area, Belaga, Sarawak. Purposive sampling was used to select four primary informants representing two distinct generational groups: older speakers (aged 50 years and above) who act as traditional custodians of the language, and younger speakers (aged between 15 and 49 years) who actively use the Kayan language while navigating a modern multilingual environment.



Map of the Sungai Asap Resettlement Area, Belaga, Sarawak

Source: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/1vXeMtRxVYMn8kiz7> (Google Map)

The research instrument comprises two primary analytical sections. The first section focuses on core lexicon elicitation across seven major semantic categories: pronouns and interrogatives; numerals and quantifiers; adjectives; kinship terms; body parts; verbs of motion; and natural elements. Informants were asked to provide the native Kayan lexical items for each prompt, allowing for a direct comparison of basic vocabulary between the two generational cohorts.

The second section captures qualitative sociolinguistic insights regarding the social factors and domains that prompt lexical changes across generations. This section identifies whether structural differences arise from lexical replacement, minor phonological variations, or direct borrowing from contact varieties such as Standard Malay, Sarawak Malay, and Iban.

Data Analysis and Lexicostatistical Formula

To quantify the degree of linguistic relationship and vocabulary stability between the two generational cohorts, the gathered data were analyzed using lexicostatistical calculation. Every paired lexical item obtained from the older and younger speakers'

Swadesh lists was cross-examined to identify cognates (words sharing a common structural or etymological root) versus non-cognates (structural replacements or total borrowings).

The standard lexicostatistical formula used to compute the percentage of lexical retention is as follows:

$$C = \frac{c}{N} \times 100$$

Where:

C = The percentage of cognates (lexical retention rate) shared between the two generations.

c = The total number of matching cognate pairs identified between older and younger speakers.

N = The total number of items compared from the Swadesh list (e.g., 200 items).

Conversely, the percentage of lexical variation (**V**) was calculated using the inverse formula:

$$V = 100\% - C$$

The mathematical results from these formulas were then matched against Swadesh's percentage scale to determine whether the generational varieties represent a highly preserved core lexicon (resulting in your 71% retention and 29% variation rates), which was then supplemented descriptively by the qualitative data regarding social domains and borrowing mechanisms. A qualitative descriptive method integrated with lexicostatistics was chosen because it is highly suitable for capturing precise structural trends in core vocabulary and allows for meaningful systemic comparisons within the speech community.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on the lexical data collected from speakers representing two distinct generations, the older generation (PT1 & PT2) and the younger generation (PM1 & PM2) of the Kayan ethnic community in Sungai Asap. The results are organized according to lexicostatistical analysis using Morris Swadesh's (1952) 200-basic-word list to determine the rates of lexical retention and shift. Following this, the section discusses the specific patterns and mechanisms of lexical change observed across generations, classified into four distinct categories: retention, phonological variation, lexical replacement, and language borrowing. Each mechanism is analyzed to identify the extent to which the Kayan language is being maintained or shifting, and how these patterns relate to external social factors.

In addition, this section discusses the implications of these linguistic shifts on the vitality of the Kayan language in daily life. This aspect is crucial, as the preservation of basic vocabulary across generations is widely recognized as a key determinant of the long-term vitality and survival of a minority mother tongue (Holmes, 2013). The analysis is conducted comprehensively with reference to relevant linguistic frameworks and previous studies, thereby linking the findings to broader issues concerning the maintenance of

minority languages in the context of migration, resettlement, and the dominance of official or regional vehicular languages.

Lexicostatistical Analysis: Rates of Lexical Retention and Shift

The quantitative analysis of the 200 basic vocabulary items using Morris Swadesh's (1952) lexicostatistical approach reveals a clear divergence in the linguistic repertoire between the older and younger generations of the Kayan community in Sungai Asap. The empirical findings indicate the following structural distribution:

- **Lexical Retention (Lexical Similarity):** The rate of lexical retention across the generations stands at **71%**. This indicates that a substantial portion of the core vocabulary remains intact, serving as a stable linguistic bridge between the older and younger members of the community.
- **Lexical Shift (Lexical Variation):** Conversely, the rate of lexical shift or divergence is recorded at **29%**. This percentage signifies a noticeable erosion and modification of the basic vocabulary among the younger generation within the resettlement environment.

According to Swadesh's historical linguistics framework, a 71% retention rate over a relatively short generational span signifies an accelerated rate of language change, highlighting that the Kayan language in Sungai Asap is undergoing an active process of modification and shift due to external sociolinguistic pressures.

Patterns of Lexical Retention (Retained)

In the category of lexical retention, the findings indicate that core vocabulary items remain dominant and are consistently spoken across both older and younger generations. This stability demonstrates a strong linguistic resilience in fundamental semantic domains. The maintenance of these items is highly evident in basic human concepts, body parts, natural phenomena, and essential verbs. Examples of completely retained vocabulary items include:

- **Pronouns:** *Me/I* (akui), *You* (ikak), and *Us/We* (itam).
- **Numerals:** *One* (ji) and *Two* (duak).
- **Adjectives/Descriptors:** *Big* (ayak) and *Long* (aru).
- **Human/Animal terms:** *Woman* (doh), *Man* (lakek), and *Bird* (manok).
- **Essential Verbs:** *Eat* (kuman) and *Drink* (duie).

This high level of retention among core vocabulary terms supports Holmes' (2013) contention that intimate, everyday concepts are the most resilient against language shift. The consistent usage of these native terms indicates that the immediate domestic environment continues to function as a primary space for preserving the mother tongue's core identity.

Mechanisms of Phonological Variation (Phonological Change)

The findings reveal that a portion of the lexical divergence is driven by phonological variation, where the younger generation (PM1 & PM2) modifies the pronunciation of native Kayan words rather than replacing them entirely. This mechanism typically manifests as a shift in vowel sounds or the shortening of initial morphemes. Empirical examples of this phonological drift include:

- The word for *small* shifts from *da'ok* in the older generation to *du'ok* or *du'o* among the youth.
- The word for *where* undergoes initial morpheme shortening from *ha inok* to *hinok*.
- The word for *what* shortens from *ketnun* to *nun* or *kenun*.
- The word for *sit* shifts from *melok* to *melo'* with a glottal modification.

This pattern suggests that while the younger generation retains the semantic essence of the native vocabulary, their structural execution is adapting. These phonetic reductions and modifications reflect a natural process of linguistic simplification often observed in younger speakers of minority languages who are operating in highly fluid, modern communication environments.

Mechanisms of Lexical Replacement

A more profound pattern of language change identified in the data is lexical replacement, where the original vocabulary used by the older generation is completely substituted with an alternative native term or undergoes semantic contraction by the younger generation. The findings show notable substitutions in daily vocabulary, such as:

- The pronoun for *them* shifts from *dahak* to *dahlok*.
- The quantifier for *a bit* shifts from *kahang* to *ouk* or *duok*.
- The word for *worm* (*haleng*) is replaced by the youth with *ulel*, which originally means worm/caterpillar, showing a broadening or overlapping of semantic boundaries.
- The verb for *standing* shifts from *nekering* to *biti*.

These replacements indicate an internal restructuring of the Kayan vocabulary among the younger generation. The loss of specific words like *haleng* and *nekering* in favor of simplified or alternative terms demonstrates a gradual narrowing of the traditional lexical repertoire, signaling that certain specialized terms are fading from the active memory of youth.

Mechanisms of Language Borrowing

The most critical factor driving the 29% lexical shift is language borrowing. The data demonstrates that the younger generation, particularly the youngest cohort (PM1) is aggressively absorbing foreign vocabulary into their speech due to what can be described as a collapse of language memory. When unable to recall the native Kayan word, youth directly adopt words from Malay (the national language), regional Sarawak codes, or English. Examples of aggressive borrowing include:

- *Flower*: The traditional Kayan word *pidang* is entirely replaced by the Malay word *Bunga*.
- *Blunt*: The native *kasel* is replaced by the Malay *Tumpul*.
- *Walking stick*: The native *putang* is replaced by the Malay *Tongkat*.
- *Wing*: The native *kapit* is replaced by the Malay *Sayap*.
- *Scratch*: The native *beli* is replaced by either the English-derived *Skres* (*scratch*) or the Malay *Calar*.
- *Flow*: The native *anyol* is replaced by either the English-derived *Lo* (*flow*) or the Malay *Alir*.

This extensive reliance on borrowing highlights a significant vulnerability in the younger generation's lexical competence. It reflects Giles' (1973) framework regarding linguistic accommodation and dominance, where speakers heavily exposed to prestigious, official, and vehicular languages naturally substitute weaker minority codes with dominant terms to maintain communicative fluency.

Social Factors Influencing Lexical Shift and Language Vitality

The final objective of this analysis is to contextualize these linguistic findings within the broader social factors that drive language change in the Sungai Asap resettlement area. The 29% lexical shift is not a random linguistic phenomenon but is directly compelled by external sociolinguistic pressures:

- **Formal Education System:** As argued by Prasetyo and Sulistiyarini (2023), educational institutions often function as primary channels for linguistic homogenization. The pervasive use of Standard Malay as the official medium of instruction in schools structurally conditions Kayan youth to prioritize dominant school codes over traditional terms like *pidang* or *kasel*.
- **Multilingual Resettlement Environment:** The historical migration from the original longhouses in the Bakun Dam area to the centralized resettlement of Sungai Asap forced the Kayan community into closer, constant contact with other ethnic groups. This multi-ethnic interaction establishes regional contact varieties (such as Sarawak Malay or Iban) as dominant codes, a phenomenon widely observed in other Bornean shifting contexts (Tuah et al., 2020; Norazuna et al., 2010). This multi-ethnic cohabitation dilutes the exclusivity of the Kayan language and pushes it further toward structural modifications.
- **Digital Technology and Social Media:** The constant exposure of the younger generation to digital media, internet culture, and social platforms overwhelmingly exposes them to dominant codes like Malay and English. This digital immersion accelerates the linguistic erosion of traditional Kayan terms, replacing them with modern loanwords like *skres* or *lo*.

In summary, while the **71% retention** rate proves that the Kayan language still possesses a functional core, the **29% shift** driven by phonological erosion, lexical replacement, and aggressive borrowing reveals an ongoing vulnerability. Without active interventions or conscious efforts to reinforce traditional vocabulary within the family and community domains, the linguistic vitality of the Kayan language among the youth of Sungai Asap will face a continuous decline in the wake of modernization and globalization.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the rates of lexical retention and shift among two generations of the Kayan ethnic community in Sungai Asap and assessed the specific linguistic mechanisms driving these changes. The findings show that the Kayan language continues to play a significant role in the daily lives of the community, as evidenced by a substantial **71% lexical retention rate** in core vocabulary across generations. The choice to maintain or modify vocabulary is strongly influenced by the generation of the speaker, the specific semantic domain, and the linguistic environment, which aligns with Fishman's (1972) principles regarding domain distribution and theories of language maintenance (Fishman, 1991).

Although there is a stable core of traditional vocabulary retained in fundamental concepts, a noticeable **29% lexical shift** is occurring among the younger generation. This shift is dynamically manifested through phonological variation, lexical replacement, and aggressive language borrowing. Traditional terms are increasingly substituted by Standard Malay and English words due to a gradual collapse of language memory among Kayan youth. This linguistic vulnerability is heavily compelled by external social factors, including the formal education system, the multilingual resettlement environment of Sungai Asap, and the pervasive influence of digital technology and social media.

Nonetheless, the continued vitality of the Kayan language depends on communal resilience, sustained exposure among younger generations, and ongoing opportunities for natural use. This study therefore recommends that heritage language empowerment programmes be expanded through community-based documentation, cultural activities, and the creative use of social media as a contemporary medium to revitalize traditional vocabulary among the youth (Sa'adiah & Wahab, 2024).

For future research, it is suggested that greater attention be paid to broader external factors that accelerate the level of lexical shift, such as physical migration patterns, urbanization, and the evolving role of the family structure in intergenerational language transmission (Ma'alip & Abd Wahab, 2024; Ting & Chang, 2008). The scope of research may also be widened to include Kayan communities remaining in different geographical locations to obtain a more comprehensive, comparative picture of dialectal variation and language dynamics within the ethnic group. In addition, follow-up studies employing more in-depth qualitative approaches, such as ethnographic observations and sociolinguistic interviews, are highly recommended. It is evident that the preservation of local minority languages requires systematic and structural efforts so that the unique Kayan language of Sungai Asap continues to live, be valued, and be transmitted intact to future generations.

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