



# Cross – Border Identity and Cultural Hybridity among Border Communities in Jayapura – Vanimo Borderline

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how cultural interaction along the Jayapura–Vanimo frontier shapes cross-border identity and produces cultural hybridity. Using a qualitative, literature-based design, the research integrates border process theory, hybridity theory and Melanesian relational perspectives to interpret how everyday practices contribute to identity formation in this borderland. The analysis finds that mobility, reciprocal exchange, ritual participation, and kinship obligations create a relational environment that operates independently of the political boundary, demonstrating that identity is sustained through ongoing social interaction rather than administrative categorization. The study also finds that hybridity forms an organized configuration comprising ritual reciprocity, institutional blending, and expressive practices that enable residents to navigate both customary and state systems. This research contributes by demonstrating that relational obligation functions as the key mechanism linking cross-border interaction in the Melanesian context to the resilience of hybrid identity, clarifying why cultural ties endure even in the face of policy shifts or mobility constraints.

## KEYWORDS

Border Bnteraction; Cultural Hybridity; Identity Formation; Jayapura–Vanimo; Relational obligation

## INTRODUCTION

Borders are often treated as rigid geopolitical lines, yet contemporary scholarship demonstrates that they operate as dynamic social spaces shaped by movement, exchange, and everyday interaction. This is evident in many border regions where communities engage across territorial divides despite state-imposed boundaries ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). The Jayapura–Vanimo frontier exemplifies this reality. For generations, indigenous communities on both sides have maintained kinship networks, cultural practices, and trade relations that transcend the formal border, producing a lived environment sustained by historical continuity ([The National, 2024](#); [The PNG Sun, 2024](#)). Although these interactions are longstanding, national-level policies tend to emphasize control, surveillance, and sovereignty. Such security-oriented narratives often overshadow the sociocultural dimensions of border life and the lived realities of communities whose identities and livelihoods depend on cross-border engagement ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). Border scholars argue that frontiers function as social processes rather than fixed demarcations. [Newman \(2006\)](#) and [Wastl-Walter \(2011\)](#) conceptualize borders as socially constructed spaces that are continuously produced and reproduced through everyday practices and interactions. Through repeated interaction, border zones evolve into corridors of exchange where identity, belonging, and authority are continually negotiated, positioning borderlands as active social fields shaped by the practices of those who inhabit them ([Paasi, 2011](#); [Dwyer & Minnegal, 2023](#)). In parallel, hybridity theory provides a lens to understand how individuals at borders develop flexible, negotiated identities. Drawing from postcolonial theory, [Bhabha \(1994\)](#) explains hybridity as the outcome of cultural interaction that generates new, in-between forms of identity rather than fixed cultural categories. Subsequent scholars argue that daily cross-cultural interaction in border spaces produces adaptive forms of belonging and sociocultural negotiation relevant to frontier communities ([Kraidy, 2005](#); [Wastl-Walter, 2011](#)).

Together, border theory and hybridity theory allow researchers to conceptualize border regions as multilayered sociocultural systems. They emphasize the role of human agency, cross-border movement, and everyday negotiation in shaping identity formation across state boundaries ([Dwyer & Minnegal, 2023](#); [Ohoiwutun, 2023](#); [Wastl-Walter, 2011](#)). Studies across Southeast Asia demonstrate that local practices such as trade, kinship visits, ritual exchanges, and informal governance play a central role in shaping frontier dynamics. These insights provide a regional foundation for analyzing how interaction construct's identity in various border contexts ([Pakasi et al., 2024](#)). Despite the significance of the Jayapura–Vanimo corridor, academic attention to this specific frontier remains limited. [Korwa and Rumabar \(2024\)](#) note that scholarly and policy discussions on the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea (PNG) border largely prioritize macro-level governance and security concerns, while giving insufficient attention to how identity, sociocultural authority, and everyday interaction intersect within this border space. Similarly, [Ohoiwutun \(2023\)](#) emphasizes that the sociocultural dynamics of eastern Indonesian border regions are

frequently marginalized in both academic and policy-oriented analyses. This imbalance has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the sociocultural dynamics shaping community life along the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea frontier.

Existing research typically focuses on macro-level security concerns or state-centric border management, such as border militarization, immigration control, customs enforcement, transnational crime prevention, and bilateral security cooperation between state authorities, often emphasizing sovereignty, surveillance, and regulatory compliance over every day social interaction ([BNPP, 2024](#); [Dwyer & Minnegal, 2023](#); [Wastl-Walter, 2011](#)). These approaches fail to capture how local communities interpret, navigate, and give meaning to cross-border interactions. As a result, the identity dynamics of everyday cross-border life remain understudied. The key gap lies in the absence of focused analysis on how cross-border cultural interaction generates hybrid forms of identity and belonging within the Jayapura–Vanimo border communities, as no study has systematically examined how interactional practices serve as mechanisms of identity formation in this specific frontier.

By addressing this gap, this article provides a theoretically informed and empirically anchored account of border identity formation, revealing how cross-border interaction actively structures processes of identity negotiation and sociocultural continuity in the Jayapura–Vanimo frontier. Its novelty lies in integrating border theory and hybridity theory to interpret the cultural, social, and interactional processes through which hybrid identities emerge in a relatively understudied border context. This perspective contributes to border studies and policy discussions by reframing the Indonesia–PNG frontier as a sociocultural system rather than solely a geopolitical divide. Such an approach aligns with calls for more human-centered, community-based border governance ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#); [Dwyer & Minnegal, 2023](#); [BNPP, 2024](#)).

This research also reflects regional efforts to strengthen people-centered development and recognizes the importance of cultural resilience, mobility, and social continuity in maintaining stable border relations, making the findings relevant to Indonesia’s broader diplomatic and developmental strategies. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine how cross-border cultural interaction shapes hybrid identities among residents living along the Jayapura–Vanimo corridor. By analyzing existing empirical work, the study seeks to explain the mechanisms through which interaction fosters cultural continuity, identity negotiation, and sociocultural transformation within this frontier region ([Hau’ofa, 1994](#)). Given these conceptual and empirical gaps, the following section synthesizes existing scholarship to situate the present study within broader border and hybridity research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on borders has evolved significantly, shifting from views of borders as rigid political demarcations toward recognizing them as dynamic social spaces shaped by everyday life and interaction ([Paasi, 2012](#); [Donnan & Wilson, 1999](#)). Early scholarship largely centered on sovereignty and national security, but recent studies emphasize informal

mobility, cultural continuity, and localized agency ([Amilhat-Szary & Giraut, 2015](#)). In Indonesia, this shift is reflected in research documenting the coexistence of state control with the movement of people, goods, and ideas across border regions ([Risal et al., 2022](#); [Pakasi et al., 2024](#)). Contemporary work by [Brambilla \(2023\)](#) conceptualizes borders as temporal processes animated by memory and interaction, while [Wastl-Walter \(2011\)](#) argues that Global South border studies must prioritize local perspectives, indigenous agency, and decolonial viewpoints. These conceptualizations position borderlands not as static peripheries but as socially constructed arenas of negotiation, adaptation, and lived exchange.

Empirical research in Indonesia reinforces the importance of local perspectives in understanding border dynamics. In Papua's Muara Tami District, residents maintain robust systems of kinship-based mobility, informal trade, and cultural engagement across the Indonesia–PNG border, demonstrating community-centered patterns of interaction that persist despite state restrictions ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). Several recent empirical investigations along the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea border foreground local lived experience and everyday social processes rather than abstract state narratives. [Tambunan and Lantang \(2024\)](#), examining how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional community life around the Indonesia–PNG border, show that long-standing customary cross-border practices of kinship, trade, and cultural exchange were severely curtailed by the closure of border posts and markets. Such a condition also undermined social cohesion and economic security for indigenous Papuan residents who normally relied on these interactions for subsistence and ritual obligations. Their field-based descriptive research details how traditional cross-border mobility persisted through informal routes despite heightened surveillance, reflecting deep social bonds that transcend national boundaries.

In a previous study, [Tambunan and Lantang \(2022\)](#) focused on the economic dimensions of the same public health shock (COVID-19), analysing how the closure of the Transnational Border Post (PLBN) and associated market activities reduced income, heightened unemployment risk, and threatened long-term poverty among borderland households. This work uses interviews and observation to show the pandemic's ramifications for local border traders and households, situating economic insecurity within broader debates about human security at remote frontiers. However, while these studies emphasize descriptive accounts of local perspectives and governance challenges, they generally frame borderland life through community impact and policy response lenses rather than theorizing how everyday cross-border interaction actively shapes hybrid cultural identities. The mechanisms of identity negotiation, syncretic cultural formation, and boundary re-making that emerge through quotidian practices remain under-theorized within the Indonesia–PNG context. Consequently, a conceptual gap persists: one that requires research to analytically center cross-border cultural interaction as constitutive of how people on both sides of the frontier negotiate, contest, and transform social identities in ways that extend beyond descriptive or governance-oriented explanation.

Comparable trends appear across Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Academic studies of the Indonesia–Malaysia border emphasize institutional cooperation but often neglect everyday community-level engagement ([Rachman, 2022](#)). Research from the Indonesia–Timor-Leste frontier similarly documents how annual cultural ceremonies and cross-border festivals sustain social cohesion and maintain peaceful relations between communities ([Saehu & Wulandari, 2024](#)). These cases collectively challenge state-centric interpretations of borders and emphasize that frontier zones in the region are lived environments where interaction, exchange, and belonging intersect.

Within the Indonesian policy landscape, recent publications advocate incorporating socio-cultural dimensions into national border programs. [Pakasi et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrate that participatory border planning strengthens trust between Indonesia and PNG communities, while [BNPP \(2024\)](#) reports the effectiveness of community diplomacy mechanisms in the Skouw–Wutung area. Improved infrastructure, such as road connectivity, has further increased everyday interaction and transformed once-isolated settlements into vibrant sites of contact ([Dwyer & Minnegal, 2023](#)). These developments point to the importance of recognizing cultural continuity, kin-based governance, and shared heritage as integral elements of border management ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)).

International scholarship complements these insights by highlighting how memory, affect, and collective identity shape border experiences ([Brambilla, 2023](#); [Lacy & van Houtum, 2025](#)). Pacific thinkers such as [Hau’ofa \(1994\)](#) emphasize an Oceanic consciousness, viewing boundaries as connectors rather than dividers. This perspective resonates strongly in the Papua–PNG context, where cross-border interaction is embedded in genealogical links, ritual obligations, and shared historical trajectories. While the broader literature affirms the hybrid and relational nature of border spaces, there remains a scarcity of studies explicitly linking these cultural dynamics to the Indonesia–PNG frontier. This absence reinforces the need to integrate identity analysis and cultural hybridity into the study of the Jayapura–Vanimo border.

To address this, theoretical work on identity and hybridity provides essential grounding. Hybridity theory, initially shaped by [Bhabha’s \(1994\)](#) articulation of the “Third Space,” conceptualizes cultural identity as negotiated, relational, and continually reconfigured. [Voicu \(2011\)](#) expands this idea by arguing that hybridity emerges through ongoing processes of interaction shaped by mobility, power, and contextual negotiation. [Donnarumma \(2020\)](#) further conceptualizes hybridity as configuration - an embodied interlacing of social, affective, and cultural elements - that produces new forms of relational identity. Although developed outside border studies, these insights align directly with frontier contexts, where identities evolve through repeated cross-border engagement, ritual encounters, and adaptive sociocultural practices.

Border theory similarly emphasizes process and negotiation. [Donnan and Wilson \(1999\)](#) describe borders as socially constructed fields shaped by everyday practices, while [Paasi \(2012\)](#) identifies the institutional, symbolic, and social dimensions through which

borders acquire meaning. These perspectives converge in recognizing that border identities are not fixed but emerge through interaction, mobility, and the negotiation of belonging. This aligns with recent literature that stresses the need for decolonial and community-grounded interpretations of border life, particularly in Global South contexts ([Sidaway, 2018](#)). The relevance of these theories becomes clearer when viewed alongside Melanesian epistemologies. [Tendy \(2025\)](#) articulates the “Melanesian Way” as a framework of leadership, consensus, relationality, and conflict resolution shaped by communal values, kin-based obligations, and fluid negotiation. This worldview conceptualizes social boundaries as permeable and relational, mirroring the lived realities of PNG and Papua border communities in Indonesia. When integrated with hybridity and border theory, the Melanesian Way illuminates how identity formation in frontier contexts is embedded in culturally grounded practices of reciprocity, negotiation, and shared belonging.

Taken together, these bodies of literature reveal three key syntheses. First, empirical studies across Southeast Asia and Melanesia show that border communities sustain cross-border interaction through kinship, ritual, and cultural continuity, yet academic and policy analyses frequently overlook these dynamics. Second, theoretical work on borders and hybridity consistently emphasizes fluidity, negotiation, and relational identity, concepts that align directly with the lived experiences of Jayapura–Vanimo residents. Third, Melanesian frameworks of relationality provide culturally specific insight into how identity is constructed at this frontier, offering a conceptual bridge between global border theory and local sociocultural practices. Integrating these elements establishes a coherent foundation for the present study: the Jayapura–Vanimo border is not merely a geopolitical boundary but a socially constructed and culturally mediated space where hybrid identities emerge through sustained interaction, historical continuity, and Melanesian relational dynamics. This theoretical grounding supports a deeper exploration of how border residents negotiate belonging, sustain cultural ties, and inhabit hybrid forms of identity that challenge the linear logic of state-centered border governance.

## METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach with a literature-based research design, suitable for examining sociocultural processes and identity formation where meaning, interpretation, and context are central ([Sandelowski, 2000](#); [Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). The study is grounded in an interpretivist and exploratory paradigm, emphasizing conceptual interpretation rather than primary field data, which is appropriate for synthesizing existing empirical and theoretical knowledge on border interaction and hybridity ([Denzin & Lincoln, 2018](#)). To ensure that conceptual interpretation remains consistent with local voices and lived experiences, the study prioritizes literature that is empirically grounded in community-based research, ethnographic accounts, and locally informed analyses of the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea border. Rather than speaking about border communities abstractly, the analysis draws on studies that explicitly document indigenous perspectives,

everyday practices, and locally articulated meanings of cross-border interaction ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#); [Hau'ofa, 1994](#)). In this way, “local voice” is preserved through the systematic engagement with sources produced from, or directly informed by, border communities themselves, consistent with qualitative research principles that emphasize naturalistic and context-sensitive inquiry ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)).

Preparation of research materials began with defining the analytical scope of the study, focusing on border interaction, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation along the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea frontier. Data sources consisted of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and publications from credible research organizations. These sources were selected to capture both contemporary empirical findings and foundational theoretical perspectives relevant to border theory and hybridity studies ([Newman, 2006](#); [Paasi, 2011](#); [Bhabha, 1994](#)). Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature search using keyword-based queries across academic databases and institutional repositories, including Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and regional policy research platforms. Keywords used in the search process included combinations of border interaction, Indonesia–Papua New Guinea border, Jayapura–Vanimu, hybrid identity, cultural hybridity, border communities, Melanesian identity, and sociocultural negotiation. These keywords were applied iteratively to refine search results and ensure relevance to the study’s analytical focus. Sources were screened based on credibility, relevance, and recency, with priority given to literature published within the last ten years, while seminal theoretical works were retained to support conceptual consistency.

The selected literature was organized and categorized thematically to facilitate systematic analysis. Data analysis employed a qualitative thematic analysis technique, widely used in interpretive research to identify patterns of meaning across texts ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). Each source was read closely, coded, and grouped into thematic categories such as cultural interaction, border processes, identity negotiation, and hybridity formation. An inductive–deductive strategy was applied: themes were allowed to emerge from the literature inductively, while interpretation remained theoretically guided by border theory, hybridity concepts, and Melanesian relational frameworks ([Wastl-Walter, 2011](#); [Dwyer & Minnegal, 2023](#)). Through iterative comparison and synthesis, the study identified key relational and cultural mechanisms shaping hybrid identity formation in the Jayapura–Vanimu border region. This three-stage process, preparation of research materials, systematic literature collection, and thematic analysis provides a coherent and methodologically transparent basis for the study. The subsequent Results and Discussion sections apply this analytical framework to explain how movement, obligation, and narrative interact to produce hybrid identity structures in the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea frontier.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Border Interaction as Relational Identity Production

The dynamics of mobility, obligation and narrative unfold through an interlinked set of relational processes in which mobility generates obligations, obligations animate narrative, and narrative coordinates governance and embodied recognition within the borderland field. Within this relational structure, cross-border movement forms the initiating practice through which obligations and identities take shape (see Figure 1). The empirical evidence across the corpus demonstrates that cross-border mobility in the Jayapura–Vanimo corridor functions as a generative practice that produces identity rather than merely expressing it. Movement across the border, whether for ritual, market exchange or kinship visitation, operates as a composite act that simultaneously performs economic, genealogical and symbolic functions. These practices construct a stable relational topology in which obligations, expectations and social credit circulate and accumulate, forming the infrastructure of identity itself ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). This confirms the core proposition in processual border theory that borders are enacted through routine practices rather than determined exclusively by territorial markers ([Paasi, 2011](#)). For example, documented kinship-based visits in Muara Tami routinely legitimate mobility rights through clan affiliation, while market exchanges simultaneously reinforce reciprocal expectations extending beyond economic transactions into social obligation and status recognition ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). Border crossing, in this sense, operates as a composite act, economic, genealogical, and symbolic embedded in everyday life.

Unlike studies that isolate trade or ritual as separate domains, the Jayapura–Vanimo case reveals an integrated composite system where movement is encoded through shared norms that articulate kinship, reciprocity and access rights simultaneously. In the Jayapura Regency borderlands, kinship, ritual, and governance operate as an integrated sociocultural system rather than as separable domains. Empirical studies on the Ondoafi (Ondofolo) system demonstrate that traditional authority is hereditary and sacralized, yet simultaneously exercises concrete regulatory power over land tenure, dispute resolution, and social organization, effectively functioning as a hybrid institution that bridges ancestral governance and contemporary local administration ([Tanati, 2019](#); [Tanati, 2024](#); [Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). Within this system, *adat*-based kinship relations constitute the primary mechanism of access to land and resources, shaping economic exchange and mobility independently of formal state licensing regimes.

Ritual practices further reinforce this structure: shared ceremonial obligations and cross-border kinship ties rooted in Pan-Melanesian identity require regular movement across the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea border, embedding mobility within cycles of cultural reproduction rather than treating it as an exceptional or illegal act. These ritualized exchanges sustain a shared social landscape that predates and transcends the modern boundary. Consequently, state efforts to regulate movement through formal border infrastructure such as the Skouw–Wutung post encounter persistent limits. While the state

asserts administrative sovereignty, local communities frequently interpret the border as a socially permeable bridge, authorizing movement through customary obligation rather than bureaucratic permission. This pattern aligns with broader borderland scholarship demonstrating that everyday social practices, kinship networks, and economic necessity routinely undermine the state's attempt to impose rigid territorial control ([Donnan & Wilson, 1999](#)).

As [Ohoiwutun \(2023\)](#) notes, despite intensified development and governance initiatives, traditional mobility for social, economic, and ritual purposes continues, revealing a form of localized resistance rooted not in overt political defiance but in deeply embedded sociocultural norms that re-produce the border as lived space rather than a fixed geopolitical line ([Donnan & Wilson, 1999](#)). As these obligations consolidate, narrative becomes the medium through which they are justified, interpreted and extended across social contexts. The role of narrative is equally constitutive. Oral histories, genealogical accounts and place-based narratives are deployed strategically to justify present-day cross-border actions, allocate ritual duties and legitimize claims over mobility and precedence. While prior literature emphasizes narrative's symbolic role in identity formation, the present case demonstrates its operational function: narratives act as actionable claims in negotiations over rights, access and dispute resolution ([Konrad & Szary, 2023](#)). This aligns with earlier border culture research but extends it by showing narrative as a mechanism, not merely a representational layer. These findings resonate with longstanding analyses of boundary narratives as instruments of legitimization ([Newman & Paasi, 1998](#)), while adding fine-grained evidence of how narrative is used tactically in daily governance.

Ambivalence in the Jayapura–Vanimo borderland does not manifest as social instability but as a diagnostic condition that activates governance mechanisms embedded in Melanesian relational systems. Empirical work on Melanesian political culture demonstrates that identity overlap, such as cross-border clan membership, dual administrative affiliation, or ritual obligations spanning state boundaries is not treated as anomalous but as socially legible tension requiring mediation ([Tendy et al., 2025](#)). Within the “Big Man” leadership model, ambivalence functions as a signal rather than a threat: leaders derive authority precisely from their capacity to manage overlapping identities through consensus-building, compensation, and ritualized reconciliation. This stands in sharp contrast to European hybridity scholarship, where ambivalence is theorized as exclusionary pressure producing identity fragmentation and chronic instability ([Hiraide, 2022](#)).

In Jayapura and Vanimo, tension initiates structured reconciliation processes, deliberative forums, clan negotiations, and customary adjudication aimed at restoring relational balance and reaffirming communal cohesion rather than resolving identity into fixed categories. Other institutional evidence reinforces this pattern. At the municipal level, Jayapura–Vanimo sister-city and border governance mechanisms function as hybrid mediators that translate customary consensus norms into administrative practice, particularly when discrepancies arise between state regulations and lived cross-border

routines. These forums mirror *adat* (custom) deliberation by prioritizing dialogue, reciprocity, and negotiated accommodation over enforcement. At the community level, Ondoafi/Ondofolo authorities in Sentani and Jayapura Regency actively manage leadership dualism by integrating state administrative functions (land registration, dispute resolution, community coordination) into clan-based governance structures. This institutional embedding prevents the kind of role ambiguity and contestation commonly associated with hybrid identities in European contexts, anchoring individual and collective authority within a recognized customary framework.

These governance dynamics manifest most visibly in embodied performances, where obligations, narratives and social signals materialize in recognisable practices. Similarly, performance-oriented hybridity studies highlight how embodiment (ritual attire, linguistic switching and symbolic enactments) produces social legibility ([McCracken, 2001](#)). In the Jayapura–Vanimo borderland, governance dynamics are most clearly observable in embodied performances through which obligation, authority, and reciprocity are rendered socially legible. Ethnographic evidence from Papuan and transboundary Melanesian communities shows that traditional attire operates as a calibrated semiotic system rather than mere cultural expression: elements such as the positioning and adornment of the *koteka*, the use of bird-of-paradise feathers, or bark textiles (*yokal*) index marital status, ritual maturity, clan capacity, and leadership eligibility, thereby determining who may speak, mediate disputes, or negotiate access across social and territorial boundaries. These visible markers function as immediate signals of social credit, the demonstrated ability to mobilize resources and honor reciprocal obligations which directly shapes mobility and bargaining power in cross-border contexts. Ritual performances further institutionalize this logic.

Ceremonial cycles associated with initiation and manhood, such as those documented in Hornbill- and Kaware-type ritual systems across West Papua, publicly authorize individuals to participate in communal decision-making, transforming symbolic enactment into a prerequisite for governance participation. Similarly, practices such as *pemalangan* (the ritualized blocking of space using bamboo or sago leaves) operate as embodied legal claims over ancestral land, compelling state officials to defer to customary mediation rather than enforce statutory authority. While performance-oriented hybridity scholarship emphasizes embodiment as a means of achieving social legibility in hybrid spaces ([McCracken, 2001](#)), these demonstrate a deeper integration: expressive practices are economically and legally consequential, binding actors into circuits of obligation.

This is evident in everyday interactions at PLBN Skouw and adjacent markets, where linguistic code-switching between *Tok Pisin*, Malay, and local dialects indexes relational proximity and shared Melanesian identity, directly influencing pricing, credit terms, and trust. Through these embodied cues, performance does not merely represent hybridity; it constitutes the governance infrastructure through which ambivalence, authority, and reciprocity are continuously negotiated and stabilized. Embodiment thus becomes an operational device in social accounting, enhancing earlier theories by grounding symbolic

performance in relational obligation. In Melanesia, relational norms of kinship, reciprocity, and customary mediation play a central role in governing mobility and identity. Anthropological and contemporary studies highlight how social systems prioritize relational continuity over territorial fixity, with obligation serving as the primary organizing principle of social order ([Tendy et al., 2025](#)). Along the Indonesia–PNG border, participatory governance initiatives documented by the National Border Management Agency show that integrating customary leaders into border management enhances legitimacy and compliance precisely because it aligns state policy with existing relational systems ([BNPP, 2024](#)). These findings underscore that hybridity in Melanesia is not merely tolerated but actively governed through obligation-based mechanisms.

Comparable dynamics appear in Southeast Asian borderlands, though articulated through different historical and cultural trajectories. Ethnographic research on the Indonesia–Malaysia border in Borneo demonstrates that border communities strategically navigate national identities while sustaining cross-border kinship, trade, and linguistic networks, producing hybrid identities grounded in everyday practice rather than formal citizenship alone ([Ishikawa, 2010](#)). Studies of Malay identity in maritime Southeast Asia similarly show how linguistic pluralism, historical trade networks, and economic interdependence generate fluid but materially anchored forms of belonging across borders ([Lacy & van Houtum, 2025](#)). Comparative studies also reveal how mobility disruptions test the resilience of relational systems. Research on border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic along the Indonesia–PNG frontier documents how communities adjusted obligation schedules, substituted symbolic performances, and rerouted informal mobility to maintain identity continuity, reinforcing the identity-constitutive role of movement ([Tambunan, 2024](#)).

Parallel findings in Southeast Asian maritime borders demonstrate similar adaptive strategies, confirming that borderland identities persist through recalibration rather than rupture ([Risal et al., 2022](#)). Across the comparative literature, three consistent structural patterns emerge. First, multilingual repertoires are deployed strategically across market, ritual and administrative domains, confirming affective border geographies that foreground language as an instrument of emotional positioning ([Lacy & van Houtum, 2025](#)). Second, ritual and marriage ties function as governance loops that sustain obligation networks, echoing kinship governance documented in other Melanesian frontier contexts. Third, customary and state institutions co-manage mobility through routine coordination rather than conflict, aligning with empirical findings on hybrid governance models in Indonesia–PNG border programs ([Korwa & Rumabar, 2024](#); [Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). These recurring patterns indicate systemic relational processes, rather than isolated cultural practices.

Because these processes are cumulative, they also create openings for strategic manipulation, allowing actors to convert relational capital into influence. Yet the Jayapura–Vanimo material also reveals power asymmetries embedded within reciprocity. Actors with extensive kin networks or ritual authority convert relational obligations into leverage,

consolidating influence over access, decision-making or resource flows. This dynamic confirms earlier warnings about elite capture in hybridity contexts ([Hiraide, 2022](#)) and problematizes overly harmonious depictions of border hybridity. It demonstrates that negotiated hybridity does not eliminate unequal access but reorganizes it through local relational logics. Temporal depth further distinguishes this case. Even during periods of restricted state policy, communities maintained relational identity structures by adjusting obligation schedules, performing symbolic substitutes or temporarily deferring reciprocal duties. This aligns with resilience patterns noted in historical Melanesian identity studies ([Widmer, 2012](#)) while adding a crucial mechanism: obligation arithmetic explains how ties persist through discontinuities. The combination of ritual adaptation, narrative recalibration and institutional improvisation produces endurance in identity regimes that many earlier border studies could not fully explain.

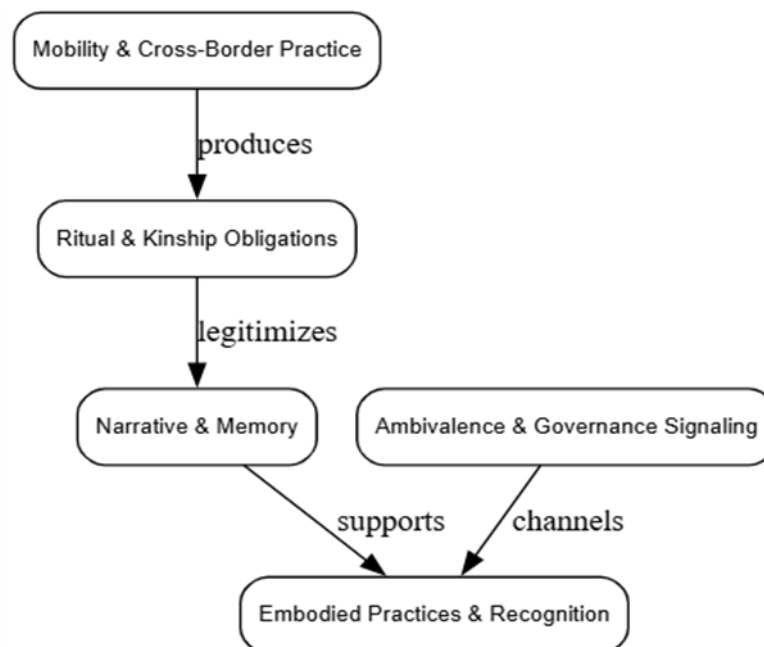


Figure 1. Structured configuration of ritual, institutional and expressive hybridity.

Source: Drawn by Authors

This cumulative architecture also clarifies why policies gain traction only when they align with these relational mechanisms rather than attempting to override them. Analysis of policy evaluations confirms that when programs align with these relational mechanisms, rather than bypass them, secure higher compliance and sustained cooperation. Interventions that institutionalize customary roles, recognize hybrid governance arrangements or support cross-border cultural continuity consistently outperform securitized, top-down approaches ([Pakasi et al., 2024](#); [Korwa & Rumabar, 2024](#)). This confirms that relational identity is not merely cultural; it is an operative governance asset. Collectively, these findings crystallize into a systemic proposition: the border functions as a relational identity field when

movement, obligation and narrative co-produce mutually reinforcing logics. Prior studies documented aspects of this system in isolation; the Jayapura–Vanimo case synthesizes them into a coherent explanatory framework that clarifies why hybrid identity in this region persists, adapts and shapes governance outcomes ([Konrad & Szary, 2023](#)).

### **Hybridity as Structured Cultural and Institutional Configuration**

The interdependence among ritual reciprocity, institutional improvisation and expressive signalling forms the underlying relational architecture through which hybrid governance consolidates in the corridor. The analysis demonstrates that hybridity in the Jayapura–Vanimo corridor is not an incidental mixing of cultures, but a highly structured configuration composed of interconnected ritual, institutional and expressive subsystems. Across the broader literature, hybridity is repeatedly shown to manifest through ritual reciprocity, adaptive governance and symbolic practices ([Voicu, 2011](#)). What distinguishes the Jayapura–Vanimo case is the tight coupling among these domains. Ritual obligation generates predictable administrative demands; institutional bricolage structures those demands; expressive repertoires communicate relational status and activate recognition. This coupling is concretely institutionalized through the Special Arrangements for Traditional and Customary Border Crossing (1973; revised 1993), which legally recognizes ritual obligations, such as attendance at cross-border marriages, funerals, hunting expeditions, and customary trade as legitimate grounds for mobility, thereby converting social reciprocity into administratively processed movement via Border Crosser Identity Cards and traditional passes administered at local border posts ([Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, Vanimo, 2022](#)).

This integration forms the analytical core of a functional hybridity model consistent with recent re-theorizations of border culture that emphasize practice-oriented mechanisms ([Konrad & Szary, 2023](#)). This structured configuration aligns with emerging frameworks (see Figure 2) in processual hybridity. Processual accounts maintain that hybridity is not a static state but a sequence of practices that recursively produce identity over time ([Voicu, 2011](#)). The Jayapura–Vanimo case affirms this claim while specifying the core sequences: reciprocal exchange, obligation accounting, institutional coordination and representational affirmation. These sequences are empirically observable in ritual calendars, dispute resolution events and local administrative logs. Diplomatic performance reports from the Indonesian Consulate in Vanimo explicitly document the routinization of such sequences, noting recurrent processing of traditional mobility requests linked to ceremonial cycles and clan-based obligations as part of standard border service delivery rather than exceptional accommodation ([Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, Vanimo, 2022](#)). Their articulation is more coherent and measurable than in other Melanesian border cases, allowing for clearer operationalization of hybridity as a governance process.

The flow from initial reciprocal exchange to administrative coordination sets the generative sequence through which mobility produces obligations and transforms them into

governable practices. Performance-oriented hybridity studies emphasize how identity is staged through embodied practices, symbolic codes and narrative frames ([McCracken, 2001](#)). Institutional analyses, by contrast, focus on how hybridity produces administrative outcomes through blended governance forms ([Pakasi et al., 2024](#)). The Jayapura–Vanimo case shows both mechanisms at work simultaneously. Ritual enactments do not merely reaffirm identity; they initiate claim-making processes that require administrative response, such as allocation of land, authorization of movement or mediation of disputes ([Korwa & Rumabar, 2024](#)). This dynamic is directly observable in officially supported commercial events such as the annual Indonesia–PNG Border Trade Fair, where ceremonial openings involving traditional performances function as authorization signals for intensified cross-border exchange and temporary mobility facilitation coordinated by local border agencies ([Pugu & Sinaga, 2025](#)). This synergy between symbolic performance and institutional effect demonstrates that hybridity functions as an instrumentally relevant variable in governance and not merely a cultural descriptor.

As obligations pass through institutional bricolage, their distribution becomes structured yet uneven, reflecting the dual potential for coordination and for concentration of advantage. Institutional bricolage, a recurring theme across comparative border studies, takes distinct forms depending on context. In some settings, customary authority is formally integrated into state structures; in others, it operates informally through negotiation. The Jayapura–Vanimo material documents both modes. Formal recognition generates predictable public goods outcomes, while informal bricolage creates contingent outcomes that disproportionately benefit actors with larger kinship networks or ritual prestige ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). Empirical evaluations of the Jayapura–Vanimo–Wewak Sister City framework show that while cultural diplomacy initiatives institutionalize people-to-people cooperation, access to programmatic benefits is unevenly distributed, often favoring actors with dense cross-border kinship ties and recognized customary standing ([Pugu & Amenes, 2025](#)). This comparative variation confirms earlier warnings that while bricolage increases flexibility, it also risks amplifying inequity if not accompanied by institutional safeguards ([Hiraide, 2022](#)). Expressive repertoires such as linguistic switching, symbolic attire and ritual choreography, serve as semiotic protocols through which actors assert hybrid belonging. Comparative studies describe these repertoires as tools of recognition ([Lacy & van Houtum, 2025](#)).

The Jayapura–Vanimo case adds an important nuance: actors deploy these repertoires strategically based on the anticipated transactional payoff. This strategic activation of repertoires transforms symbolic expression into a calculated relational move tied to obligations, credit systems and access claims. Such findings strengthen the argument that hybridity must be understood not as fluid identity expression but as structured, rules-driven practice. The close alignment of ritual, institutional and expressive domains creates a stabilizing configuration that sustains relational systems even when formal governance channels are disrupted. Resilience emerges as another distinguishing feature of hybridity in

this context. Comparative Melanesian studies show that mobility disruptions lead to partial reconfiguration of social ties ([Widmer, 2012](#)). In Jayapura–Vanimo, hybridity persists through ritual maintenance and informal institutional coordination even during periods of formal restriction. This persistence is not accidental; it reflects a coupling between ritual and governance that operates as a shock absorber.

Consular documentation during periods of tightened border control confirms continued facilitation of traditional mobility through customary mechanisms, indicating tacit administrative recognition of ritual obligation as a stabilizing governance input ([Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, Vanimo, 2022](#)). When official channels close, obligations are fulfilled symbolically, deferred or rerouted through customary pathways – preserving the hybrid structure across policy cycles. This resilience contrasts with border regions where hybridity collapses under administrative strain. Yet the comparative corpus also highlights risks. Institutional bricolage often masks elite capture, particularly when customary authorities control the distribution of obligations that confer material or political advantage ([Hiraide, 2022](#)). The Jayapura–Vanimo case confirms this dynamic: relational prestige and obligation density can consolidate power in specific kin groups, shaping who benefits from development programs or cross-border access ([Pakasi et al., 2024](#)). This underscores the need to integrate equity mechanisms into policy interventions.

The same relational linkages that allow hybrid systems to absorb shocks can also be leveraged to centralize influence, producing governance vulnerabilities within the coupled configuration. The theoretical implication is that hybridity should be recast as an operational configuration – a set of measurable variables rather than a descriptive category. These variables include frequency of reciprocal events, density of institutional linkages and diversity of expressive repertoires. This approach aligns with calls to move beyond the territorial–relational divide by adopting a more integrative analytic framework ([Paasi, 2012](#)). It also provides a methodological bridge between ethnographic insight and institutional analysis, enabling comparative testing across border contexts.

Policy studies corroborate these theoretical claims. Assessments of sister city diplomacy and border governance programs demonstrate that interventions explicitly aligned with relational norms and customary signalling practices produce more durable cooperation outcomes than purely regulatory approaches ([Pugu & Amenes, 2025](#)). Interventions that formalize hybrid governance channels, support narrative infrastructures or align with relational norms consistently produce more stable cooperation and improved service delivery ([Korwa & Rumabar, 2024](#); [Pakasi et al., 2024](#)). The Jayapura–Vanimo case supplies micro-level mechanism detail, explaining why interventions grounded in hybridity succeed. It thus provides a more robust causal chain linking ritual, obligation and governance outcomes.

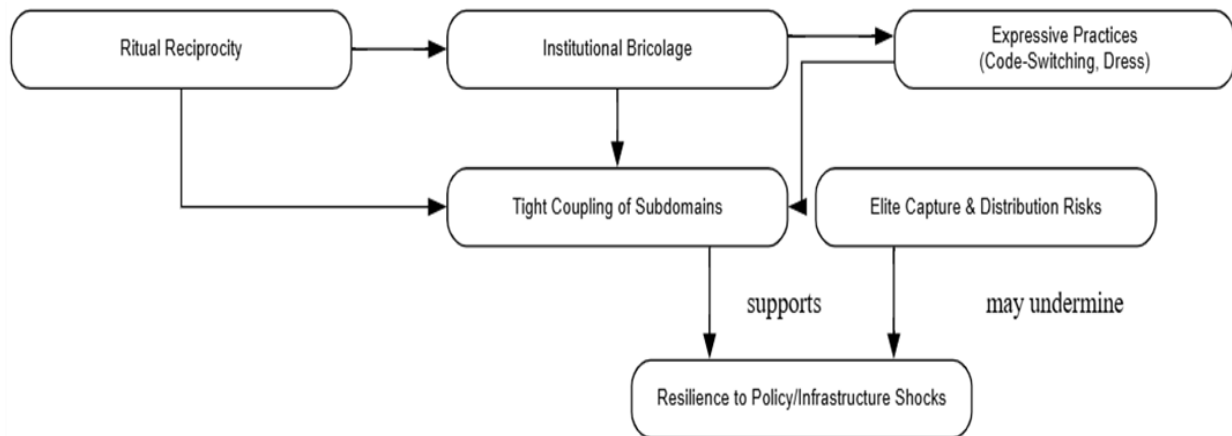


Figure 2. Rational sequencing of movement, obligation and narrative formation.

Source: Drawn by Authors

The degree to which ritual, institutional and expressive practices remain mutually reinforcing shapes how effectively border communities manage conflict, share resources and sustain cooperation. Ultimately, this structured configuration model reveals an important research agenda: testing the coupling hypothesis across multiple frontiers. The Jayapura–Vanimo case indicates that strong coupling among ritual, institutional and expressive domains predict governance resilience. Cross-regional comparison could identify whether coupling strength correlates with outcomes such as conflict mitigation, resource sharing or compliance with cross-border protocols (Konrad & Szary, 2023).

### Relational Obligation as the Causal Mechanism and New Phenomenon

Within this causal architecture, relational obligation emerges as the foundational driver that organizes how practices, credits and identities cohere across the borderland field. Comparative synthesis demonstrates that relational obligation is the most robust explanatory mechanism across the corpus. While prior studies note reciprocity and kin duty, the Jayapura–Vanimo analysis elevates obligation to a formal causal principle by detailing its procedural logic (Voicu, 2011). Relational obligation transforms discrete acts such as gift exchange, ceremonial attendance and labour sharing into durable commitments through accountability rituals, genealogical anchoring and social credit systems. This transformation is not abstract: it is operationalized through the Border Crosser Identity Card (BCIC) system, which processes thousands of traditional crossings annually and converts ritual obligations (marriages, funerals, clan ceremonies) into administratively logged movements under the Special Arrangements for Traditional and Customary Border Crossing (1973; revised 1993), as recorded in Indonesian consular performance reports (Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, Vanimo, 2022).

This procedural logic (see Figure 3) constitutes the study's key novel phenomenon: obligation arithmetic. Obligation arithmetic formalizes how credits and liabilities flow across time, people and events, generating durable identity forms that persist across political or administrative disruptions ([Widmer, 2012](#)). It also clarifies why restrictive policy reforms often fail to alter social outcomes. When administrative barriers tightened, communities adjusted obligation schedules, substituted symbolic rituals for material exchanges or leveraged genealogical narratives to maintain access claims ([Tendy et al., 2025](#)). Empirically, this adjustment is visible in market behavior: at the Skouw border market, approximately 90% of the estimated IDR 25.8 billion annual turnover is generated by PNG visitors whose participation is tied to ritual calendars and kin obligations rather than formal trade permits. Acceptance of PNG Kina and the routine use of *Tok Pisin* by Indonesian traders' function as transactional instruments that convert obligation credit into continued market access despite regulatory tightening. These adaptive responses demonstrate that policy does not directly reshape identity structures; rather, relational logic mediates and interprets policy constraints, preserving foundational social architectures.

Governance patterns become clearer once these relational calculations enter institutional arenas. The mechanism interacts with institutional bricolage, influencing how rights, access and dispute resolutions are allocated. When obligation flows are transparent and formally recognized, governance outcomes tend to be more predictable and equitable. Conversely, when obligations remain opaque and are mediated exclusively through customary channels, decision-making becomes contingent and more vulnerable to bias favoring powerful kin groups ([Pakasi et al., 2024](#)). This comparative contrast underscores the analytical importance of institutional transparency in hybrid governance models. Concrete evidence of this interaction appears in the allocation of economic infrastructure: the Skouw market contains only 152 formal kiosks, a scarcity that forces institutional actors to rely on obligation-based mediation to determine access. Empirical observations show that kiosks are disproportionately occupied by actors embedded in dense kinship networks, confirming that obligation density directly shapes distributive outcomes under conditions of limited institutional capacity ([Ohoiwutun, 2023](#)). A second novel phenomenon emerges in this context: obligation monetization. Several evaluations document systematic cases in which obligation credit is converted into prioritized market access, administrative facilitation or service-brokerage roles ([Korwa & Rumabar, 2024](#)).

Such monetization helps explain the rise of local elites who accumulate ritual credit and convert it into practical advantage, operating at the intersection of customary and formal systems ([Hiraide, 2022](#)). These dynamics reinforce the conclusion that relational obligation is not solely cultural; it is economically consequential. Further insight is gained by examining the actors who translate obligation credit into influence. Hybrid brokers (individuals who mobilize ritual prestige and relational standing) mediate community–state interactions in ways that shape negotiations, resource flows and mobility outcomes. In practice, these brokers account for a significant share of informal facilitation in cross-border

commodity flows, particularly in high-demand goods such as tobacco and consumer items, where repeated crossings and relational inducements reduce transaction friction despite formal controls (Korwa & Rumabar, 2024). The Jayapura–Vanimo case provides process-level detail that extends earlier observations in Melanesian identity research (Widmer, 2012). Through their gatekeeping roles, these brokers reveal governance mechanisms that classical border theory has not fully captured. Their strategic positioning contributes substantially to broader understandings of frontier governance.

A broader theoretical payoff emerges once obligation arithmetic and monetization are considered together. These mechanisms enable the development of testable hypotheses in comparative research. Obligation density, monetization rate and institutional transparency can be operationalized as independent variables, with governance equity as the dependent outcome. The Jayapura–Vanimo case supplies micro-process detail that supports such operationalization, bridging ethnographic depth with comparative generalizability (Paasi, 2012). Narrative legitimization amplifies this dynamic. Narratives do not simply justify obligations; they determine which obligations acquire salience in particular contexts. Evidence shows that actors selectively emphasize or suppress genealogical lines to strengthen claims over scarce resources or negotiate cross-border rights (Konrad & Szary, 2023).

Diplomatic records from sister-city cooperation programs indicate that these narratives are actively mobilized in official cultural events and trade forums to legitimate participation and access, reinforcing obligation hierarchies that structure who benefits from cross-border exchange (Pugu & Amenes, 2025). This selective deployment, previously under-identified in border research deepens theoretical understanding of how narrative and obligation co-produce social authority.

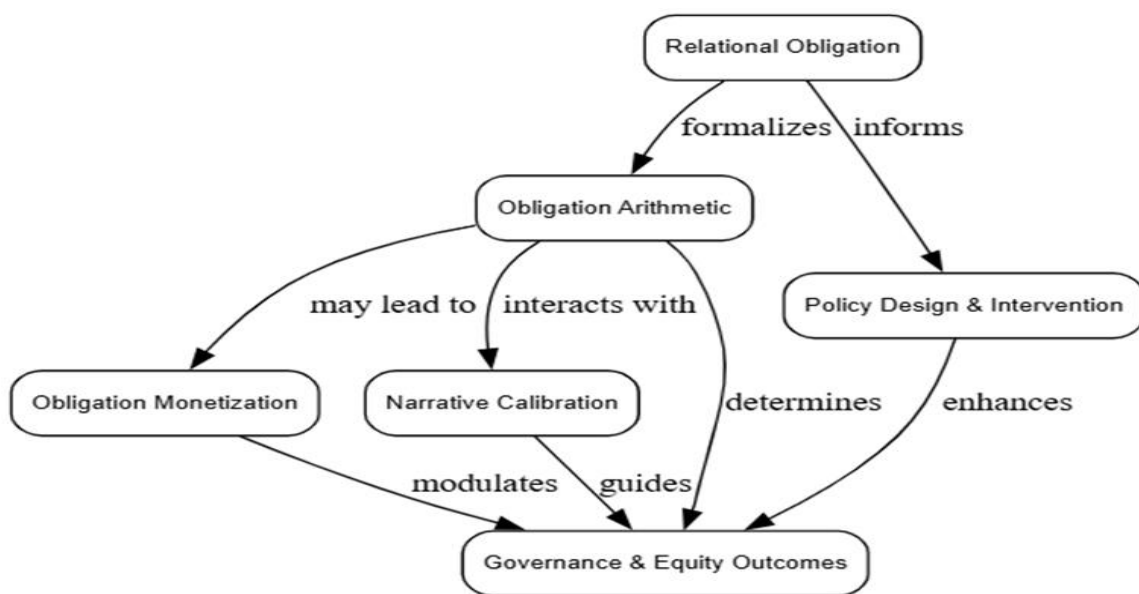


Figure 3. Casual mechanics of relational obligation, arithmetic and monetization.

Source: Drawn by Authors

Policy relevance becomes unmistakable when these mechanisms are viewed in relation to implementation outcomes. Recognizing relational obligation as the causal core requires programs to map obligation networks, render flows auditable and design institutional channels that allow obligations to be fulfilled equitably. These steps diverge sharply from conventional enforcement-centric border management and instead require culturally aligned programming models ([Pakasi et al., 2024](#)). Quantitative policy outcomes reinforce this claim: following the ratification of the 2023 Basic Border Agreement, bilateral trade indicators recorded a 55.8% increase in early 2024, correlating with policies that explicitly accommodated traditional mobility rather than suppressing it ([Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, Vanimo, 2022](#)). Comparative evaluations confirm that alignment with relational mechanisms enhances cooperation, reduces implementation resistance and produces more durable outcomes ([Korwa & Rumabar, 2024](#)). Ultimately, the Jayapura–Vanimo case transforms hybridity from a descriptive category into a mechanistic configuration grounded in relational obligation. Such reframing clarifies why hybrid identities persist across political cycles, adapt to institutional shocks and shape governance trajectories in Melanesian borderlands ([Tendy et al., 2025](#)).

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to assess how cultural interaction along the Jayapura–Vanimo frontier shapes cross border identity, and the findings clearly demonstrate that identity formation in this borderland is produced through sustained relational practices that operate independently of the political boundary. The evidence shows that daily mobility, reciprocal exchange, kin-based obligations and ritual participation generate a stable relational field in which belonging is continuously enacted. These findings affirm that the border in this region functions as a lived social environment rather than a dividing line, and that cross-border interaction itself is the primary mechanism through which hybrid identity emerges.

The study further finds that hybridity in this context functions as a structured configuration grounded in ritual reciprocity, institutional blending and expressive repertoires. Comparative analysis confirms these findings align with broader patterns in the literature while advancing a clearer causal explanation: relational obligation is the central mechanism that links interaction and hybridity, enabling identities to remain resilient despite administrative shifts or policy constraints. These findings collectively fulfil the research objective by demonstrating that hybrid identity in the Jayapura–Vanimo borderlands is sustained not by political delineation but by obligation-based social processes that structure cultural and institutional life across the frontier.

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