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Recentering the margins? The politics of local language in a decentralizing Indonesia

by

Adam Harr© *(St. Lawrence University, USA)*

aharr@stlawu.edu

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RECENTERING THE MARGINS?
THE POLITICS OF LOCAL LANGUAGE IN A DECENTRALIZING INDONESIA[1]
Adam Harr (St. Lawrence University)
aharr@stlawu.edu

§ ABSTRACT

One unexpected consequence of Indonesia's regional autonomy legislation has been a widespread and heterogeneous "revival of tradition" in regional politics (Davidson and Henley 2007; Vel 2008). Relatively unnoted within this revival is the emerging importance of local languages in some district level elections. People who had been accustomed during the New Order to being addressed by politicians in the Indonesian language found themselves addressed by district executive (*bupati*) candidates in local languages that index local ethnolinguistic identities. Drawing data from the first election of a district executive in the central Florinese district of Ende in 2008, this paper argues that in some cases the revaluation of local languages in electoral politics results from the intersection of the decentralized territoriality of the Indonesian state with local "semiotic ideologies" (Keane 2007) that are constructed in terms of "centers" and "margins" (Tambiah 1973; Fox 1997; Kuipers 1998). I close by considering whether speakers of local languages are empowered by this revaluation.

§ INTRODUCTION

In the wake of regional autonomy reforms, observers have described in Indonesia's new regional politics a "revival of tradition" (Davidson & Henley, 2007; Tyson, 2010; Vel, 2007; Von Benda Beckman & Von Benda Beckman, 2011) or "renaissance of local identities" (Mietzner, 2014). This paper considers how the rhetoric of tradition and localness was performed by politicians in the run-up to the first direct election of a Bupati in central Flores, and how these performances were part of the revaluation of a "local language" (*bahasa daerah*).

When I arrived to begin fieldwork in central Flores in 2006, a revival of tradition was evidently well underway, and was spoken of as a revival of "adat" (Tsing, 2009). As a newcomer, I generally explained myself by saying that I had come to study "Lio

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language and culture" (*bahasa dan budaya Lio*). My interlocutors would nod knowingly and remark to a bystander, "He wants to study Lio adat" (*Dia mau belajar adat Lio*). I was told that I had arrived in central Flores at a good time for my purposes, because many villages were "reviving" (*angkat kembali*) aspects of adat that had lain dormant for some time, and I was told that this revival had started, maybe, in the early 2000s. Since these same people also told me that adat practices had weakened since the early 70's, I initially assumed that the boot heel of the New Order had pushed adat practices down, and that with the boot heel removed at the end of the twentieth century, it seemed that those same practices would spring back up like trampled grass. As time passed, however, and as the first direct election of Bupati of Ende district approached, I witnessed and heard numerous stories of prospective Bupati candidates who were funding ancestral rituals and the (re)construction of adat architecture. Prospective candidates were infusing their resources and their prestige into ritual practices and places at the same time that they sought legitimacy in these practices and places. More than a "natural" resurgence, adat practices that had been ignored or suppressed in New Order politics were being actively bolstered by post-New Order politics as a new class of local politicians sought the privileged status of "native sons" (*putra daerah*).

In the idiom of contemporary American electoral politics, local identity had become crucial to the construction of a candidate's "Message" (Silverstein & Lempert, 2012). As Michael Silverstein and Michael Lempert show, political "Message" is not *a* message—not a count noun—but a kind of semiotic space the politician inhabits. Message in this sense is the "politician's publicly imaginable 'character' as it is presented to the electorate" (Silverstein & Lempert, 2012, p. 10). Message is not a set of truth claims; it is an autobiographical aura that politicians indexically project and invite others to project upon them.

One way in which post-New Order politicians inhabit the Message of local-ness is by addressing their constituencies in so-called "local languages" (*bahasa daerah*). "Local language" is, of course, not a stable, independently existing category, but is, rather, shaped by history, ideology, and the influence of missionaries, scholars, and bureaucrats (Gal & Irvine, 1995; Keane, 1997; Kuipers, 1998). My use of the phrase here is intended to reflect the usage that I encountered in central Flores. There, people who had been accustomed during the New Order to being addressed by politicians in the Indonesian language found themselves addressed by Bupati candidates in local languages that index local ethnolinguistic identities. Local languages have clearly been revalued in the era of OTDA, and this revaluation is "creatively indexed" (Silverstein, 1976) each time a candidate invokes a local language. I argue that these performances of local identity and local language are moments when vital sociopolitical relations become publicly visible, and I will show how these performances raise the possibility of unpredictable interactions between politicians and their publics.

§ LANGUAGE & MARGINALIZATION

This decentralizing moment is certainly not the first time Indonesia's languages have been revalued by the shifting territoriality of the state. In *Language, Identity, and Marginality in Indonesia* (1998), Joel Kuipers offers a detailed historical and ethnographic picture of the processes by which poetic, ritual registers of a Sumbanese language were devalued as "marginal" during the colonial period and New Order. The full breadth of Kuipers' argument is beyond the scope of this paper; however, I wish to highlight Kuipers' careful attention to the ways in which Sumbanese language ideologies connect language and place. These linguistic ideologies and practices are part of what constitute Weyewa ancestral villages as "exemplary centers" (Geertz, 1968; Tambiah,

1985). Kuipers shows the ramifications of the forced integration of these exemplary centers into a bureaucratic territorial logic defined by boundaries rather than centers. This is a territorial logic that is governed by a principle of "hierarchic inclusion" (Kuipers, 1998, p. 23). Such a territorial logic entails "a system of nested spatial groupings in which the ones below were totally included in the ones above" (Kuipers, 1998, p. 38). In such a nested system, "ritual performers [who] were once accustomed to enacting the history of their domain as the center of the world … now needed to see their discourses as a sub-species of a larger, more authoritative discourse that issued from a colonial metropolis" (Kuipers 1998, p. 38). This hierarchical territorial logic was maintained through Suharto's New Order during which time Indonesian served as the encompassing language of politics (Errington, 1998; Keane, 2003).

In sum, Kuipers reveals the fine-grained sociolinguistic consequences for a people oriented to ritual centers when those ritual centers become parts of a bureaucratic backwater. I suggest that in the inaugural elections of district executives across many parts of Indonesia, the situation Kuipers describes was, in a limited sense, inverted: bureaucratic backwaters became political centers and the languages and ritual centers located therein took on new values.

§ Politics of the Local in Kabupaten Ende

To illustrate, I turn to the first-ever election of a Bupati in Ende regency, which is currently one of eight regencies on Flores island in eastern Indonesia. In the 2008 election of Bupati, residents of Ende regency were suddenly in a position to imagine themselves as voting citizens in a territory whose boundaries were intimately familiar and roughly isomorphic with ethnolinguistic borders (Von Benda-Beckman & Von

Benda-Beckman, 2011). At the same time, seven candidates for Bupati were forced to decide how to attract this newly constituted electorate.

Ende district has a total population of around 230,000, and the population is divided into two self-identifying ethnolinguistic groupings: the Endenese and the Lionese. My own ethnographic perspective is very much rooted in extended participant-observation in the lives of people who identify themselves as *Ata Lio*. This is a designation claimed by approximately 170,000 people—just under ¾ of the district. As Eriko Aoki (2004) reminds us, Lio people participate in a number of intersecting transnational linkages, so that "Lio" is only one of several situational self-identifications an individual might claim. For present purposes, however, it serves as a useful simplification.

Almost all Lio people participate to some degree both in Catholic sacraments and in ancestral rites. Ancestors are sometimes described as intercessors between the living and God. As one informant, a prominent member of the Catholic Church, put it: "Where is God? But I can show you the graves of my father and his father." Ancestral rites pay homage to the dead, who gave to the living an ordered, habitable world. Indeed, life as we know it was made by those who came before us, and for this the living are obliged to carry forward ancestral rituals. As Ende regency held its first ever election for Bupati, these rituals were, in many instances, propelled by a new kind of aspiring politician.

One candidate began funding rituals in his mother's home village as early as 2002. In 2006, when he staged the lavish, week-long secondary reburial of his father in another village, the events were widely and approvingly seen as the beginning of his political campaign—a way to get his name buzzing on lips and tongues as the bannered, honking funerary motorcade wound way across central Flores. When the official six-week period of his campaign began in October 2008, the candidate's eldest son and

campaign manager were possessed by a pair of ancestral spirits who constructed an altar at an especially "potent" (Allerton, 2013) mountain-top point on the Lio sacred landscape. At campaign events, the son and campaign manager, under ancestral influence, regularly issued oracular pronouncements in an archaic poetic register of Lio that required translation by the candidate's youngest son. In this way, the candidate was able to inhabit a Message of spatio-temporal "precedence" (Fox, 1997): his campaign controlled an ancestral variety of Lio that was understood to be prior to, and therefore hierarchically superior to, contemporary polycentric varieties of Lio.

This candidate's campaign way by no means unique. At least four of the seven 2008 Bupati candidates staged or funded large-scale adat events. Against this backdrop of revivalism, I turn to one prospective candidate's failed attempt to use tokens of locality to garner the support of one segment of this constituency.

§ THE VICE BUPATI LEARNS HIS PLACE

The Vice Bupati was three hours late, and several hundred residents of Koanara were left waiting by the road in the afternoon heat. After a week of round-the-clock hubbub in which crews constructed a stage and vast bamboo and tarp enclosure, amassed hundreds of chairs and arranged them into rows, sliced garlic cloves and shallots by the pound, and slaughtered and cooked several pigs and a cow, preparations were finally complete for the inauguration of the new *kepala desa* ("village head") by the Vice Bupati. The Vice Bupati, along with the Bupati, had been selected by Ende's Regional People's Representative Assembly (*DPRD*) before democratizing reforms were passed. Now it was 2007 and many believed that the Vice Bupati had his sights set on campaigning for Bupati the next year.

The inauguration ceremony had been scheduled for 11 o'clock, but at 2 o'clock the Vice Bupati still had not arrived. Now and then an SMS conveyed news of his whereabouts in a nearby village, and folks looked at their watches, shook their heads, and went back to chatting or playing cards. In a moment of piqued frustration, the man who had tirelessly spearheaded the preparations cried out, "Oi! We're little people!" (***Kami ata lo'o!***)[2].

All complaints were set aside, however, when a spout of dust from the Vice Bupati's convoy of SUV's appeared at the far end of the road. Village leaders dressed in slacks and tailored *ikat* blazers converged on the Vice Bupati's vehicle for handshakes before the Vice Bupati was ushered to an arch of banana fronds that had been raised to serve as a portal into the village. Encircled by hundreds of watchers, the entourage ambled up Koanara's stony thoroughfare to the bamboo-framed, tarp-covered enclosure that had been constructed for the day's events. There was space under the impressive rectangular enclosure for six hundred or more seats, all facing a sizeable stage. On the stage, two blocks of elevated seats had been arranged for VIPs: ceremonial leaders (***mosa laki***) sat in one group stage left; civil servants, local medical staff, and the Catholic priest sat in another block stage right. At the head of the stage, a flower-strewn table and special high-backed chair had been arranged for the Vice Bupati. With countless pockets of watchers gathered in windows and doorways at the edge of the enclosure, the Vice Bupati looked out wearily on a crowd of nearly a thousand.

After performing the official inauguration of the village head, the Vice Bupati's main order of business before the obligatory meal was a "speech" (*sambutan)*, which began with formal greetings to all present from himself and the Bupati. The Vice Bupati then immediately launched into an account of his busy day to that point, saying that he

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[2] All Lio words appear in bold italics. Indonesian appears in plain italics.

had already been to three functions similar to this one in other villages. Following is a rough transcript of this small section of his speech, in which the "monologic discourse" (Bakhtin, 1981) of a formal speech is momentarily transformed into a dialogue between politician and public. For this reason, I have organized the transcript in turns at talk. Of particular importance are the Vice Bupati's misuses of directional terms in the first and third turns at talk. These mistakes are corrected by members of the audience in the second and fourth turns at talk.

Fragment from the installation of Kepdes Koanara

1. <u>Vice Bupati</u>:   *Sore ini saya sudah di tiga tempat.*
                     "This afternoon, I've been to three places."

                     Neabuga aku mena Demulaka
                     "This morning, I was **mena**[3] Demulaka"

2. <u>Audience</u>:   ***Ghale.***
                     "***Ghale***."[4]

3. <u>Vice Bupati</u>:   ***Ghale?***
                     "***Ghale?***"

                     [points in the direction of Demulaka]

                     Ghale .
                     "***Ghale.***"

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[3] **Mena** refers to the left hemisphere relative to an uphill-downhill (***ghele-ghawa***) or upstream-downstream (***gheta-lau***) axis, assuming a downhill (***ghawa***) or downstream (***lau***) orientation.

Following is a list of matched pairs of core directional terms:

Gheta/***Lau***:	Upstream/Downstream
Ghele/***Ghawa***:	Uphill/Downhill
Ghale/***Mena***:	Right/Left (from POV of facing either *lau* or *ghawa*)
Gheta/***Ghale***:	Sunrise-ward/Sunset-ward

[4] Ghale has different directional meanings at different scales. At a relatively near scale, ***ghale*** means "to the right if facing either "downstream" (***lau***) or "downhill" (***ghawa***). At a relatively distant scale, ***ghale*** means "towards the sunset," i.e. "West." For people in Koanara, Demulaka is ***ghale*** in the near-scale direction.

Saya melantik duapuluh-delapan orang Badan Permuyawaratan Desa.
"I installed twenty-eight members of the Village Assembly."

[2 second pause]

Jam satu **neanea** *…*
"At one o'clock this afternoon …

[Vice Bupati bobs his head]

Ghale *juga?*
"**Ghale**, too?"

4. Audience: **Lau**!
"Downriver!"

5. Vice Bupati: **Lau**. *Saya* **lau** [heh-heh].
"Downriver. I'm downriver, heh heh."

Lau Woloara *…*
"Downriver Wolara …"

Aku *lantik duapuluh-satu orang*
"I installed twenty-one members of the

Badan Permusyawaratan Desa … **no'o** *Kepala Desa*
"Village Assembly, along with the Village Head Petrus Dari."

This segment shows the Vice Bupati confronting the polycentricity (Blommaert, 2010) of a "local language." The Lio language is part of a dialect chain that extends across central Flores and also includes the Ngada, Nage, Keo, and Endenese languages (Fox, 1998). The Lio language itself is locally understood to encompass at least four distinct varieties, each named for its first person singular pronoun: *bahasa* **neku**, *bahasa* **aku**, *bahasa* **ahu**, and *bahasa* **ja'o**. At a finer grain, each village seems to have its own lexicon of obscenity. This can be tricky, since words that are quite obscene in one village are often commonplace terms in a neighboring village. Perhaps the most granular level of variation in the Lio language is its system of directional terms.

Although Lio directional terms encode a set of geocentric coordinates that are relatively stable across the area, the application of these coordinates is a matter of highly localized convention, in some instances particular to an individual household but more generally subject to conventions determined at the village level. The directional system was certainly the first and most persistent puzzle that I encountered in speaking Lio, but my friends told me that they, too, felt confused and uncomfortable in new places because they didn't know how to apply directional terms. The anthropologist Eriko Aoki, who has conducted ethnographic research in central Flores for over thirty-five years, reports a story that was told to her of a man who was gored by a water buffalo because he misinterpreted a directional term in a neighboring area (Aoki, 1996, p. 139). The Vice Bupati's mistake was not so serious, but it nonetheless carried repercussions.

In referring to his morning activities, the Vice Bupati consistently flubs the directional terms that are obligatory before a place name of reference. When he misuses a term, members of the audience correct him, first mildly, then more forcefully. Significantly, the corrections came from Koanara's ceremonial leaders, seated stage left. Crucially, after being corrected the first time, the Vice Bupati checks his next directional usage with the audience before committing to it. As he checks whether he is using the correct directional term, he bobs his head in a way that reflexively indexes a submissive stance. When I later showed this video footage to friends who had not been present at the event, his head bob provoked laughter and the exclamation that "he's humbled!" (*kai mea*!). In performing in a local language, the Vice Bupati's monologic speech was ruptured, and he opened himself to an unplanned and disadvantageous dialogue with the audience.

By invoking his official functions elsewhere, the Vice Bupati indicated his mobility, that his executive powers transcended any particular village; but in doing so,

he draws on linguistic resources that are intrinsically *not* mobile, in the sociolinguistic sense elaborated by Jan Blommaert (2005; 2010).

He situated himself as the center of several villages' activities, such that the activities in Koanara were but a small part of his plans for the day. In other words, his rhetorical retracing of his steps was, in Kuipers' terms, an act of hierarchical encompassment—or would have been had he not gotten lost along the way. In using the wrong directional terms, the Vice Bupati did more than misspeak. He failed to speak from where he was, because to speak in Lio is to indicate the proper deictic relationship with places that lie elsewhere.

The Vice Bupati's gaffe in the Lio language exposed him to the possibility of being publicly corrected—that is, for the public to correct him. Using local signifiers subjected him to local linguistic norms. This was a visible display of a new indexical order in which politicians would periodically be subjected to public evaluation based on local criteria. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that this minor linguistic gaffe was a watershed moment in Endenese politics, much less Indonesian politics. I merely suggest that this moment and many more like it in Ende district and districts across Indonesia were moments when a new indexical order was made manifest in publicly accessible signs.

Of course, there would have been no gaffe if the Vice Bupati had spoken only Indonesian, as I am told had been typical of political rhetoric in central Flores during the New Order. Though a native speaker of Lio, the Vice Bupati was evidently not accustomed to using Lio in his speeches. When he became a prospective candidate for Bupati the next year, the most common dismissive criticism I heard was that "he doesn't know how to talk" (***kai gare bebo***). Ultimately, he was unable to garner sufficient party support to submit himself as an official candidate in the election.

§ Conclusion

Drawing on theoretical and ethnographic insights from Kuipers (1998), I have proposed that, in at least some cases, the post-New Order "revival of tradition" results from the intersection of the decentralized territoriality of the Indonesian state with local language ideologies that value language varieties in terms of "centers" and "margins." Drawing further inspiration from Blommaert (2010), and Bakhtin (1981), I have proposed that regional politicians' rhetorical performances in "local languages" raise possibilities for new, unpredictable forms of dialogic interaction between politicians and their polycentric publics. These proposals, alongside arguments and evidence put forth by other papers in this panel, point to a sociolinguistic terrain on which the Indonesian language and the Indonesian state no longer offer the cardinal coordinates.

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