



DOCUMENTATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIAS LANGUAGE AS A STRATEGY FOR PRESERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

Observations on the use of the South Nias language (Li Niha Raya), which is spoken in the districts of Telukdalam, Maniamölö, Luahagundre, Toma, Onolalu, and Mazinö, as well as its subdialects in the Telo and Hibala Islands, indicate a gradual decline in language use, particularly among younger generations. This decline has also affected their attitudes toward and appreciation of their cultural heritage, as language and culture are closely interconnected. As the use of the South Nias language declines, concerns arise about the preservation of local cultural identity and traditional knowledge embedded in the language. To address this situation, various language development and documentation efforts have been undertaken. This study aims to describe the initiatives carried out by the researcher and the research team to support the maintenance and revitalization of the South Nias language. The language maintenance initiatives undertaken by the researcher and the team include translating selected sections of the Bible into South Nias, providing South Nias language instruction at various educational levels ranging from elementary schools to universities, and developing a curriculum framework to facilitate the sustainable teaching and preservation of the language. This study employs a qualitative research design. Data were collected through documentation of the language maintenance and revitalization initiatives undertaken by the researcher and the research team to preserve and promote the South Nias language. The collected data were analyzed descriptively to identify and explain the strategies implemented in language maintenance efforts. The findings show that the researcher and the team successfully translated four New Testament books into South Nias and played an active role in developing educational programs to support language development. Nevertheless, these efforts need to be continuously strengthened, as the current condition of the South Nias language remains vulnerable. Therefore, collaboration among local communities, educators, and government institutions is essential to ensure the long-term preservation and revitalization of the South Nias language.

INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Language is a medium through which human beings express their thoughts and feelings, thereby influencing the way people perceive and understand the world around them. According to Keraf (2004), language is a communication system consisting of sound symbols produced by human speech organs and used as a means of interaction among members of a society. Furthermore, language can be studied as a system of grammatical structures encompassing the aspects of sounds, words, and sentences. As an object of study,

language is a manifestation of human intellect and reasoning, reflecting the cognitive processes and mental capacities of its speakers (Alisjahbana, 1977).

The influence of language on human thought can be observed in patterns of thinking and speaking. For example, the Javanese language employs several speech levels, including *ngoko*, *krama*, and *krama inggil*, while Balinese distinguishes between *sor* (low speech level) and *singgih* (high speech level) (Saddhono, 2014). Such linguistic stratification demonstrates that language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of social identity and group membership. In this regard, language often serves as an expression of the identity of a particular ethnic group, community, or society (Sumarsono, 2007). Therefore, language is inseparable from culture and constitutes an essential aspect of human life.

Culture is the product of human intellect, creativity, and endeavor (Widyosiswoyo, 2004). According to Koentjaraningrat (2005), culture encompasses the totality of human ideas, actions, and creations that are acquired through learning rather than inherited instinct. This definition suggests that culture is a key indicator of human civilization and social development. Through culture, communities inherit and transmit the values, knowledge, and traditions passed down from previous generations.

Language and culture are closely interconnected and cannot be separated from one another. Language is one of the fundamental elements of culture (Koentjaraningrat, 2005). At the same time, language reflects the cultural values and worldview of the society in which it is used. The characteristics and forms of a language are shaped by the culture that sustains and develops it. Consequently, understanding a language also requires an understanding of the cultural context in which that language exists.

1. The Relationship Between Language and Culture

Language and culture are two essential elements that cannot be separated, as they are closely interconnected and mutually influential. Culture is a complex, abstract, and broad concept that encompasses various aspects of human life (Mulyana & Rakhmat, 2006). It is often described as a comprehensive way of life that shapes the values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices of a community. Sociocultural elements are embedded in many aspects of social activities and interactions within a society. Based on this understanding, culture can be viewed as a system of knowledge that includes human ideas, beliefs, and patterns of thought. Language, in turn, serves as a comprehensive reflection and expression of culture (Alisjahbana, 1977). The role of language is particularly significant because it contributes substantially to the development and transmission of culture (Mardikantoro, 2013). According to Masinambouw (2000), language occupies a central position in human life because it encompasses multiple dimensions, including biological, psychological, social, and cultural aspects.

Therefore, language and culture are inseparable, as they maintain a close relationship and continuously influence one another (Abusyairi, 2013). The use of language should always take into account the norms and values that prevail within the cultural system in which the language is used. The interaction between language and culture varies across different regions and communities. Although they are deeply interconnected, many people tend to regard language and culture as separate and unrelated entities. In reality, both serve as important indicators of human civilization and social development. Through language, future generations can learn about the growth, achievements, and transformations of past civilizations. Thus, it can be concluded that language and culture have always maintained a harmonious relationship throughout human history. Language also functions as a medium for expressing and preserving local wisdom. In addition to facilitating communication and social interaction, language serves as a vehicle for transmitting local knowledge, values, and traditions from one generation to the next, as well as for introducing local wisdom to broader communities.

Local wisdom refers to the worldview, noble values, and traditional knowledge that have been created, developed, and preserved by local communities across generations. It functions as a guide for behavior, a marker of cultural identity, and a means of maintaining harmony between humans and their environment. Since local wisdom is often transmitted orally, its preservation is closely linked to the survival of local languages. To address the decline of regional languages, various efforts have been undertaken, including language development, revitalization, and documentation programs aimed at ensuring their continued use and transmission to future generations.

2. Portrait of the Nias Language

From a linguistic perspective, Indonesia is home to a remarkable diversity of languages. The primary language of the nation is Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia*), which serves as the national and official language and functions as a unifying medium for all citizens of the Republic of Indonesia. As the national language, Indonesian requires continuous cultivation and development. Language cultivation aims to improve the quality and correctness of language use, while language development focuses on expanding Indonesian's capacity as a medium of national communication and as a vehicle for expressing various aspects of life in accordance with societal and technological advancements. Indonesian language and literature are enriched and supported by the country's regional languages. Indonesia consists of hundreds of ethnic groups, each possessing its own linguistic and cultural traditions. According to language mapping conducted by the Language Development and Fostering Agency between 1992 and 2017, at least 669 regional languages are spoken throughout the Indonesian archipelago, with many others yet to be documented. These regional or ethnic languages include Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Makassarese, Batak, Nias, and many others.

One of Indonesia's regional languages is Nias (*Li Niha*), spoken by the Nias ethnic community inhabiting Nias Island and its surrounding islands. Nias Island is located off the western coast of Sumatra, situated between Simeulue Island to the north and the Mentawai Islands to the south, with the Indian Ocean to the west and the western coast of Sumatra to the east. The island covers approximately 5,625 square kilometers, extending about 120 kilometers from north to south and 40 kilometers from east to west. According to the 2017 population census, Nias had a population of 813,155 inhabitants (BPS Nias, 2017). The Nias archipelago is inhabited predominantly by the Ono Niha people, who use *Li Niha* as their primary means of communication and social interaction. Fries (1979), a German missionary, once suggested that the inhabitants of Nias belonged to a single ethnic group and spoke a single language. However, due to the geographical diversity of the archipelago, linguistic variation is evident across different regions. Not all communities use the same variety of the language, and many villages possess distinct dialects.

Based on research of Zagötö (2018), the Nias language consists of two major languages: (1) Northern Nias (*Li Niha Yöu*), with various dialects and subdialects spoken in North Nias, Gunungsitoli, West Nias, and Central Nias; and (2) South Nias (*Li Niha Raya*), with its own dialects and subdialects spoken in the southern part of Nias Island, particularly in the districts of Telukdalam, Maniamölö, Luahagundre, Toma, Onolalu, and Mazinö, as well as on the Tello and Hibala Islands. This study focuses exclusively on South Nias (*Li Niha Raya*). Today, this language is no longer widely used, as many speakers increasingly prefer Northern Nias or Indonesian. It is important to note that the majority of Nias people are Christians, and most Christian-related materials—including the Bible, hymnals, Bible storybooks, religious education materials, and other church publications—are written and published in Northern Nias. Similarly, sermons, liturgical practices, and prayers are commonly conducted in Northern Nias. Consequently, the use of South Nias has become largely confined to informal domains, such as communication within families, among neighbors, and within village communities.

At present, many younger members of the Nias community no longer value their ancestral language. Regional languages are often perceived as outdated, less prestigious, and irrelevant to modern life. Instead, younger generations tend to take greater pride in using Indonesian or foreign languages, which are commonly associated with modernity, education, and social mobility. As the use of South Nias continues to decline across various domains of social and cultural life, urgent and sustained efforts are needed to preserve, revitalize, and develop the language to ensure its transmission to future generations and safeguard the cultural heritage it embodies.

B. Purpose of the Research

This study aims to describe the efforts undertaken to maintain and preserve the South Nias language through systematic language development and documentation activities

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach within the framework of sociolinguistics to investigate the maintenance of the South Nias language. The data comprised various language maintenance efforts carried out by the researcher and the research team. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods to explain and interpret the language preservation initiatives that had been implemented

RESULTS

To address the ongoing decline of the South Nias language, various language development and documentation initiatives have been undertaken. Language documentation serves as an important strategy for safeguarding and preserving a language or dialect from further decline and potential loss. In addition, language development efforts have been implemented by teaching and promoting the South Nias language.

In accordance with government policy, Nias language instruction has been incorporated into the local content curriculum (*muatan lokal*) in schools. The language is taught as a medium of instruction from Grades 1 to 3 of elementary school. Furthermore, the Nias Hope Foundation (*Yayasan Harapan Nias*) has introduced Nias language instruction at both elementary and junior high school levels. Similarly, the South Nias Education Foundation (*Yayasan Pendidikan Nias Selatan*) offers South Nias language courses as part of its educational program.

Another significant initiative in the development and documentation of the South Nias language is the translation of four New Testament books into South Nias. This translation project has been initiated by the South Nias Language Preservation Foundation (*Yayasan Pelestarian Bahasa Nias Selatan*) and carried out by a team consisting of Mr. Bambowai Laiya, S.Th., M.A., Mr. Famakhoi Wau, S.Th., M.R.E., and the researcher. Through this initiative, the team seeks not only to provide religious texts in the local language but also to contribute to the preservation, documentation, and continued use of South Nias for future generations.

DISCUSSION

Language and culture are two fundamental elements that cannot be separated, as they are intrinsically interconnected. Language constitutes one of the essential components of culture, as argued by Koentjaraningrat (2005). Similarly, Abusyairi (2013) emphasizes that language and culture are inseparable because they share a close and reciprocal relationship, continually influencing one another. Therefore, preserving the South Nias language also means preserving the cultural heritage of the South Nias people.

The perception that the Nias people possess only a single language, as suggested by the missionary Fries (1979), has had negative implications for the active use and recognition of the South Nias language. This misconception has contributed not only to the declining use of South Nias but also to a reduction in public awareness and concern regarding the maintenance of the language as an integral part of cultural identity. In contrast, the research conducted by Zagötö (2018) demonstrates that Nias Island is home to two distinct languages: Northern Nias (*Li Niha Yöu*) and South Nias (*Li Niha Raya*). Given the considerable geographical extent of Nias Island, linguistic variation in the form of different languages, dialects, and subdialects is both natural and expected.

Consequently, the South Nias language, as an important marker of the cultural identity of its speakers, must be preserved and protected from further decline. Sustaining the language requires continuous efforts in documentation, development, and revitalization to ensure its continued use across generations. To contribute to these efforts, the researcher and the research team have undertaken a range of language maintenance initiatives, including language documentation, curriculum development, language instruction, and the translation of educational and religious materials into South Nias. However, the success of language preservation cannot depend solely on the efforts of a small group of individuals. Active participation and collaboration among local communities, educational institutions, cultural organizations, and government agencies are essential to strengthen the vitality of the language and to ensure its long-term transmission to future generations. Only through such collective commitment can South Nias continue to serve as a living language and a valuable component of the cultural heritage of the Nias people.

CONCLUSION

The current state of the Nias language, particularly South Nias (*Li Niha Raya*), is increasingly vulnerable and warrants serious attention. As the number of speakers continues to decline, the language faces the risk of endangerment and eventual extinction. One of the major factors contributing to this decline is the weakening of intergenerational language transmission. Many parents no longer teach the Nias language to their children, opting instead to use Indonesian or other languages in the home environment. These languages are often perceived as more modern, prestigious, and advantageous for educational and socioeconomic advancement. Furthermore, some parents believe that exposing children primarily to Indonesian from an early age will better prepare them for formal schooling. This perception persists despite the continued inclusion of regional languages in elementary education, particularly during the early years of primary school.

In light of these challenges, concerted and sustainable efforts are needed to ensure that future generations retain their linguistic heritage and cultural identity. The active involvement of government institutions, educational organizations, community leaders, and local communities is essential for the successful preservation and revitalization of the language. Preserving South Nias is not merely a matter of maintaining a means of communication; it is also a vital step toward safeguarding the cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, collective memory, and linguistic diversity of the Nias people. The survival of the language will help ensure that the cultural values and indigenous knowledge embedded within it continue to be transmitted to future generations.

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