

# Language Documentation in Southern Indonesia: Rote, Dhao, and Kupang

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## Abstract

In the last decade, language documentation and revitalization become an important focus of linguistic research in the world. This field becomes significant because, indeed, language constitute a vital means in human life in case of communication. In this paper I will outline the current state of documentation and the efforts of revitalization of languages in Southern Indonesia with the involvement of local community. The discussion will focus on three languages; Rote, Dhao, and Kupang Malay.

Firstly, we look at some previous researches on those three languages. Linguistic research on Rote has actually been done since 1800s when a local Malay teacher from Rote Island, D. P. Manafe, published his paper *Akan Bahasa Rotti* (Rotinese Language) (Manafe, 1889). Manafe introduced the orthography and the variety of geographical dialects of Rotinese language, Pello (1890) published a Rotinese – Malay wordlist, and Fanggidae (1892) also published a paper on Rotinese. In 1900s, a Dutch linguist, J. C. G. Jonker, published several books on Rotinese, such as Rotinese–Dutch dictionary (1908) and a variety of documented texts in Rotinese language (1911). In addition, research on language and culture of Rote was conducted by anthropologist, James J. Fox since 1960s and many papers and books have been published, among others, Semantic parallelism in Rotinese ritual language (1971), Our ancestors spoke in pairs (1974), and Harvest of the palm (1977). Other than Rote, a very small island next to the west of Rote, Ndao Island, has less publication on its language and culture. Forth (1988) published a paper on the relationship terminology of Ndao language and Fox (1977) published a paper disclosing the traditions of textile weaving. In addition, Walker (1982), in his book of the grammar of Sawu, wrote some basic grammar of Ndao as comparison to Sawu. Walker claimed that the two languages are different from grammatical perspective. Meanwhile, research on Kupang Malay began when Donselaar (1873) published a Rotinese – Kupang Malay wordlist and Clercq (1876) published a paper discussing about the variety of Malay spoken in Manado, Ternate and Kupang. Some brief discussion about the sociological profile and grammar of Kupang Malay was written by Hein Steinhauer in his paper, *Notes on the Malay of Kupang* (1983). The brief history of publications above indicates that the documentation of Rotinese language was actually pioneered by “local linguists”, while Dhao and Kupang Malay were initiated by “outsiders”.

Grimes, *et al* (1997) listed 23 languages in Timor area, including Rote, and Dhao. Rote is considered as having seven dialects, a classification different from Fox (1996) who grouped the language variations into nine dialects. Such internal complexity needs updated description. In 1970s, Rotinese language, as what other local people across Indonesia experienced, was prohibited to be spoken in schools. It made the use of the language decreased for about 30 years. However, as Indonesian constitution changed and also with about 200.000 speakers in Rote and Timor Islands, and by its local power, the use of Rotinese language in several new domains is easily increasing nowadays. Such situation does not occur in Ndao. The island is isolated in terms of geographical location, social and economic aspects. Population census of 2011 reported that there were 3.115 people in Ndao Island. The number does not guarantee that all are active native speakers of Dhao. The isolated situation has effect on the language use. The high mobility of people forces them to speak the languages that dominate their daily routines or even their lives, such as Rotinese and Kupang Malay. People of Dhao tend to

speak Rotinese because they are socio-politically under administration of Rote and they also speak Kupang Malay as the lingua franca of the region. Therefore, Dhao is linguistically threatened by Rotinese and Kupang Malay. Although Rotinese is still not considered as “endangered”, it cannot be denied that it is also threatened by Kupang Malay. However, in case of language maintenance through educational system, the three languages still remain similar. The languages are not formally used in class till today. Several efforts have been made. A preliminary teaching material of Rotinese has been published by Balukh (2007) and several bilingual education materials have been produced by UBB GMIT Kupang (Gimes, 2009). In case of sociolinguistic description especially on Kupang Malay, an attempt has been done by Errington (2010).

To support language documentation and revitalization, local community has a significant role – recording, transcribing, and translating data, as well as doing social networks (Grimes, 2009; Balukh, 2006; 2009; 2011, Tamelan, 2011). For the speech community member, language represents cultural heritage and, a tie to place and a sense of identity, and for the academics, language provides a unique window into cognition and the capacity of the human mind. Though their ultimate goals may differ, both have a vested interest in the documentation (Yamada, 2007).