

# Aksara Sasak, an endangered script and scribal practice

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10 February 2014

## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

The Sasak people of Lombok in eastern Indonesia have a writing tradition using an alphabetic script called *Aksara Sasak*<sup>2</sup> that appears to have been borrowed from their western neighbours the Balinese, and also influenced by Javanese writing traditions. Originally used for inscribing texts on the dried leaves of the lontar palm (*Borassus flabellifer*), a cultural tradition also shared with their western neighbours, *Aksara Sasak* has been used for writing on paper, starting in the 1970s. In 1994 a school book for teaching *Aksara Sasak* at primary school grade 4 was published (Sofii and Parman 1994) however it seems to have been little used and is now out of print. Knowledge of the script is today essentially restricted to those very few Sasaks who are interested in studying the lontar writings. There is some iconic use of *Aksara Sasak*, however the writing system and scribal practice can be described as endangered.

Compared to research on Balinese and Javanese writing and literary traditions (Rubinstein 2000, Brandes 1901-1926, Creese 1999, McDonald 1986, among others), there has been very little work done on Sasak literacy (with the exceptions of van der Meij 1996, Achadiati et. al. 1999), and virtually nothing has been published about the alphabet itself, or its use in contemporary Sasak society. This paper is a first, and incomplete, report on Sasak writing and literary traditions.

## 1. Introduction

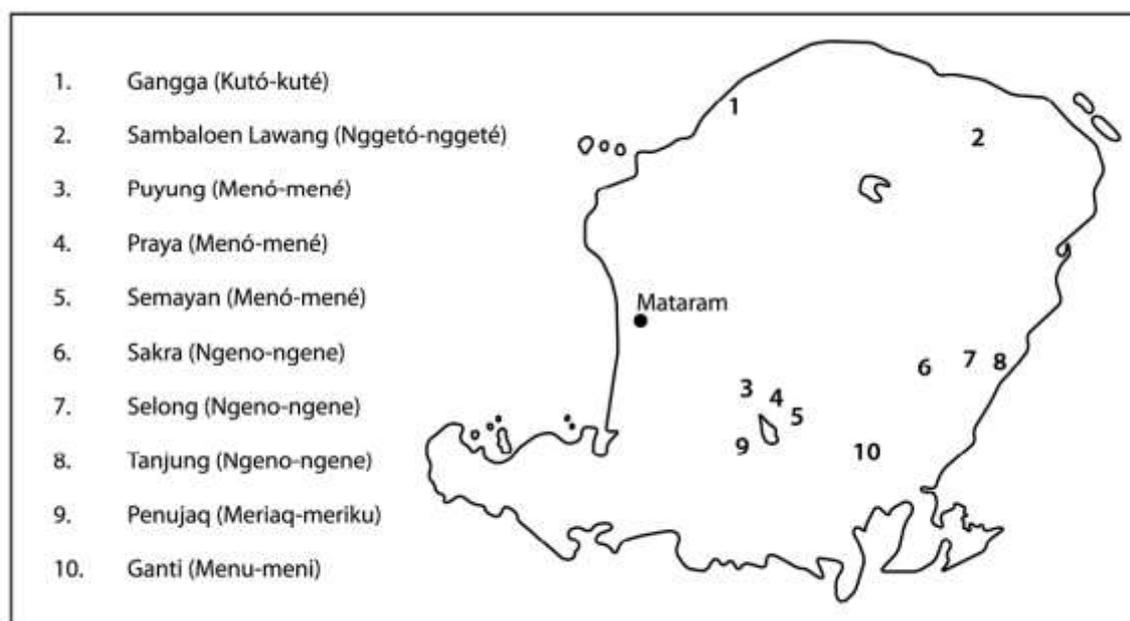
The Sasak language is spoken on the island of Lombok (immediately east of Bali, Indonesia) by around 2.7 million speakers, roughly 85% of the population of Lombok, recorded as

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared for the *International Workshop on Endangered Scripts of Island Southeast Asia*, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 27<sup>th</sup> February to 1<sup>st</sup> March 2014. My research on Sasak has been supported at various times since 1995 by University of Melbourne, the Australian Research Council, Deutsche Akademischer Austauschdienst, Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, and SOAS University of London. For assistance with data collection and analysis on Sasak writing I owe a great debt to Yon Mahyuni, Sudirman, Wilian Sudirman, Herman Suheri, Wiwik Widiawati, and the inhabitants of Penujak and Lenek villages. Thanks are also due to Bernd Nothofer for sharing his knowledge of the linguistic and social history of Sasak and Lombok, and to Anthony Jukes for comments on an earlier draft. I alone am responsible for remaining errors of fact or interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Word-final *a* is realised phonetically as one of a range of vowel sounds in different Sasak varieties, with the most common being a mid-central vowel [ɜ]. In other materials on Sasak this is written orthographically as <e>, hence <aksare>. The symbol <e> merges three phonemically distinct vowels: front mid-close [e], front mid-open [ɛ] and schwa [ə].

3,169,050 in 2010<sup>3</sup>. Sasak shows great internal variation, both geographical and social. Its complex linguistic ecology (Austin 2003) includes five ethno-linguistically named ‘dialects’ recognized by native speakers and named for the shibboleth terms for ‘like that-like this’ (i.e. Ngenó-ngené, Nggetó-nggeté, Menó-mené, Kutó-kuté, Meriaq-meriku). These labels do not however reflect fully the extensive geographical variation in phonology, lexicon and morphosyntax found within Sasak that has been documented by Teeuw (1951, 1958), Mahsun (2006) and Austin (2003, 2006, 2013). There is also a system of speech levels (Austin 2010, Nothofer 2000, 2012, Austin and Nothofer 2012) where selection among lexical alternatives marks low-mid-high status level of the addressee in relation to the speaker (and a second humble-honorific dimension that expresses the relation between the speaker and some other referent). This system, and many of the forms involved in it, have been borrowed from Balinese and Javanese (and other languages – see Nothofer 2012) as a result of centuries of contact and domination by the Majapahit and Balinese kingdoms (see Section 2). In contrast to low-level language, non-low *alus* speech forms and structures appear to be uniform across Lombok. Also uniform is a writing system called *Aksara Sasak* that has clearly been borrowed from Balinese and is used for literature written both in Ngenó-ngené Sasak and in Kawi, a form of early modern Javanese, or a mixture of both languages (see Section 3).



**Figure 1: Location of villages and Sasak varieties mentioned in the text**

## 2. Historical background

There is but poor documentation of the early history of Lombok, but the *Nagarakretagama* manuscript (written in Javanese in 1365) refers to a connection between Lombok and the

<sup>3</sup> Population of Indonesia by Province 1971, 1980, 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2010 *Badan Pusat Statistik*

[[http://dds.bps.go.id/eng/tab\\_sub/view.php?tabel=1&daftar=1&id\\_subyek=12&notab=1](http://dds.bps.go.id/eng/tab_sub/view.php?tabel=1&daftar=1&id_subyek=12&notab=1), accessed 2012-02-21]

Javanese Majapahit empire (1294-1478), and mentions the names of Sasak localities (Sukun, Lombok Mirah and Sāksāk) which were ruled by Javanese officials (Teeuw 1958: 13)<sup>4</sup>. Hayam Wuruk (1328-89), the Majapahit King from 1350 to 1389, is said to have expanded Majapahit's influence over Bali and claimed Lombok, Sumbawa and parts of Sulawesi (Ricklefs 1993: 19, Clegg 2004: 71).

At this time Lombok had number of separate Sasak kingdoms among which there was often conflict. In 1334, the Majapahit Regent Gajah Mada is said to have visited the two most important Sasak kingdoms, Selaparang in east Lombok and Pejanggik in central Lombok (Clegg 2004: 72). It was probably at this time that the Sasaks adopted various Javanese cultural traditions, including a caste system and an aristocracy (modelled on the Javanese court (see Section 3 below), and began to be influenced by Hindu-Buddhist cultural concepts and practices, including literacy (Pelras 1996: 108). Marrison (1997:222) makes the following comments about Babad Lombok (Wacana 1979) which is supposed to represent the history of Lombok:

‘various versions of the *Babad Lombok* speak of a ruler of Majapahit sending his sons to East Java, Bali, Lombok, and Sumbawa with a new teaching. Majapahit influences may be seen the style of village life, house building and agriculture, and in the music and arts, especially the *wayang lèndong*... Bali and Lombok have their heritage of Javanese language, literature, and script mostly from Majapahit and Blambangan.’

The Islamic Makassarese empire established relations with the Selaparang Kingdom of east Lombok in 1637 (Andaya 1981: 1, Cederroth 1981, 1996), introducing Islam and writing in Arabic script (though its use was probably restricted to Koranic texts and to Malay materials; no examples from this time survive). West Lombok was dominated by the Southern Balinese Gelgel kingdom centred on the port of Ampenan (Clegg 2004: 76-77), and in 1678 Gelgel drove the Makassarese out of east Lombok to Sumbawa, although sporadic resistance by the Sasaks of Selaparang continued for some time (Kraan 1980: 4). In 1740 the Gelgel Balinese of west Lombok were conquered by Gusti Wayahan Tegeh, son of the Karangasem Balinese King, who took control of much of the island. He also introduced law books and other texts and established a priesthood, promoting Balinese culture (Kraan 1975: 94, Clegg 2004: 82). Creese (1996: 149) says:

For over a century, close dynastic ties linked Karangasem-Bali with the Lombok court centres. For all practical purposes, Western Lombok thus formed part of the Balinese cultural and political world. In the Lombok courts too, new literary centres sprang up. Through their ongoing association with the Balinese courts, or perhaps independently, literary activity flourished in this new setting – old works were preserved, copied and studied, and new works were written.

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<sup>4</sup> Nothofer 2012 mentions that there is a burial hill in north-east Lombok called Majapahit.

It is most likely that *Aksara Sasak*, which is virtually identical to Balinese script, was borrowed and/or extended in use for writing Sasak at this time. Following the death of Gusti Wayahan Tegeh in 1775, separate Balinese states developed in West Lombok (Kraan 1980: 5), and by the early 19th century, there were four rivals: Karangasem-Lombok (Cakranegara), Pagesangan, Pagutan, and Mataram. As Clegg (2004: 83) notes:

The Karangasem-Lombok Kingdom was the strongest and sought to enhance its court by collecting the greatest works of the Balinese and Javanese literary tradition eventually making it the centre of literary tradition even greater than those of their rival Kingdoms in Bali. Ironically, by following what they considered a ‘Javanese model of culture’, they were actually being ‘ultra-Balinese’ (Vickers 1989: 59).

Creese (1996: 153) reports that in 1839 the ruler of Mataram-Lombok kingdom defeated the last ruler of Karangasem-Lombok and united the Balinese kingdoms of Lombok under Mataram rule. In 1855 and 1871 the Sasaks of West Lombok revolted, led by Islamic aristocrats from East Lombok. The Dutch sent in troops in 1894 after a further Sasak rebellion in 1891, destroying the Balinese Mataram kingdom and occupying the whole of the island by the end of August 1895.

The Dutch colonialists introduced writing of Sasak in the Latin script (using a version of the spelling system in use for Malay at the time), and some school books and other materials were printed. Copying of lontar texts continued, even during the period of Japanese occupation from 1942 until 1946.<sup>5</sup> In December 1949 Lombok became part of the Republic of Indonesia, and after independence Bahasa Indonesia became the national language and Sasak effectively entered a diglossic relationship with it, being restricted to family and home domains, as well as having a limited range of use in *adat* traditional cultural activities. The use of *Aksara Sasak*, alongside Latin-based writing, has continued to some degree since the time of Indonesian independence, but today there are very few Sasak speakers who have any facility in it.

### 3. Aksara Sasak

The alphabet known as *Aksara Sasak*, also called *hanacaraka*, is an Indic-based script virtually identical to that used for Balinese. It has 18 base letters consisting of a consonant plus *a*, as follows (Sofii and Parman 1994: 7):

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<sup>5</sup> Thus van der Meij 2002 reports that the Javanese text *Puspakrema* which he translated into English is based on a copy made on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1944 (Creese 2003: 576).



Figure 2. Symbols of Aksara Sasak

Syllables with other vowels use these base letters and add diacritics above, below or around the basic *Consonant+a* symbol. Independent vowel letters are used when a word begins with a vowel (as for the *a* of *aksara* in the heading at the top of Figure 2), and there are appended forms of consonants when they occur in word-medial syllable-final, position as set out in Figure 3 (appended forms are in red):<sup>6</sup>

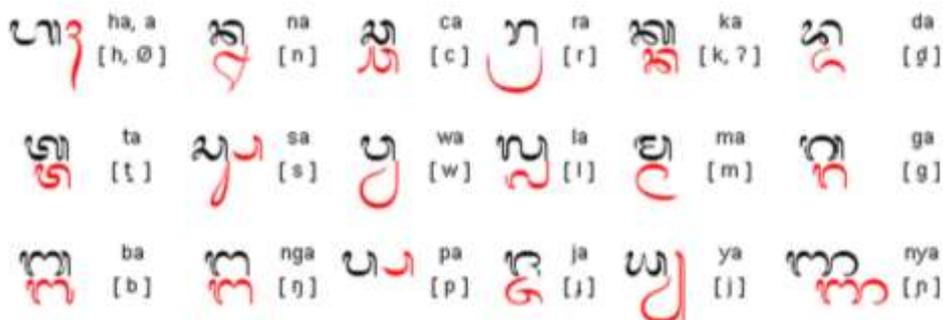
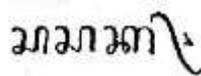


Figure 3. Base and appended forms of consonants

To write word-final consonants the symbol for *Consonant+a* is followed by a ‘killer’ symbol which indicates that the vowel is not to be pronounced – there is an example at the end of the title in Figure 2 above, namely ‘Sasak’ which is written:



Notice that Sasak distinguishes voiceless velar stop *k* and glottal stop *q* in word-final position however in *Aksara Sasak* these are both written as *ka+killer* (due to the fact that Balinese

<sup>6</sup> See [www.omniglot.com/writing/balinese.htm](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/balinese.htm) for descriptions and illustrations of the major principles of the Balinese script which are also applicable to the system used for Sasak [accessed, 2014-02-09].

lacks this contrast)<sup>7</sup>. Here is an example from Sofii and Parman (1994) of running text showing the full system in operation:

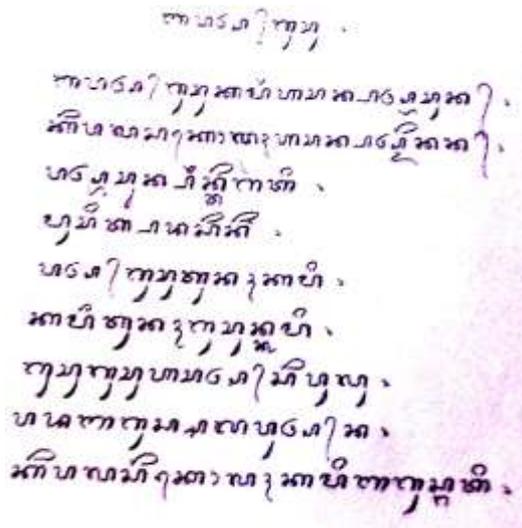


Figure 4. Aksara Sasak text example

## 4. Functions of Aksara Sasak

### 4.1 Use in literary works

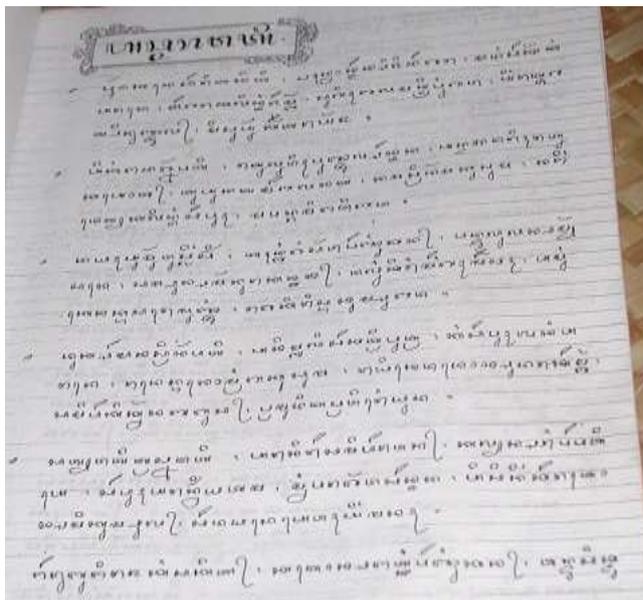
The main traditional function of *Aksara Sasak* has been its use in lontar, literary works inscribed on the dried leaves of the lontar palm in Sasak, Javanese or a mixture of both languages. An example of such as work is seen in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Lontar written in Aksara Sasak

<sup>7</sup> Bahasa Indonesia lacks this contrast also with orthographic <k> representing *k* word-initially and word-medially but glottal stop word-finally. The village names mentioned in footnote 1 above illustrate this confusion, as well as the phonological underrepresentation of orthographic <e>: Lenek is [lenek] while Penujak is [pənudʒʌʔ].

The oldest extant Sasak lontar texts date from the 19th century, many having been collected by the Dutch and now to be found in libraries in Bali or Leiden in the Netherlands (see Marrison 2000 for a full catalogue of manuscripts held in the West). The Mataram Museum also has a collection, and a number are held by individuals and families on Lombok where they are treated as heirlooms and handed down from one generation to the next. To the best of my knowledge, production of inscribed lontar has ended on Lombok, but it is not clear when this occurred. In the 1970's copying began of lontar texts onto paper for daily use in literary reading events (Austin 2010) or in teaching by concerned individuals on Lombok, some associated with the Mataram Museum. An example of this which I saw in use in Penujak village in 2002 can be seen in Figure 5; examples of reading such documents are seen in Figure 6 and Figure 7.



**Figure 5. Hand copied lontar text written in Aksara Sasak**



**Figure 6. Group reading texts in Aksara Sasak**

A further use also dates from the 1970's when lontar were copied onto paper in *Aksara Sasak* as well as being transliterated in parallel into a Latin-based script. An example of this (kindly made available to me by Sudirman) is seen in Figure 7. Note that at a reading event which I

witnessed in 2013 in Lenek village the participants used copies of transcriptions that were in Latin-based script only, without *Aksara Sasak* at all.

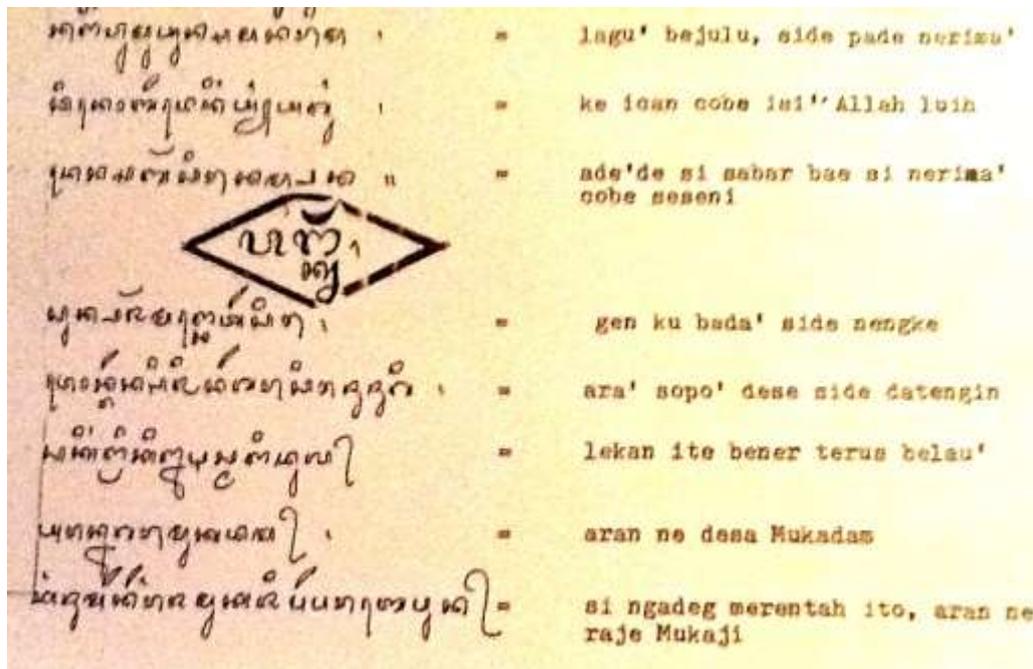


Figure 7. Lontar copy in *Aksara Sasak* and Latin-based script

#### 4.2 Use in teaching

The second function of *Aksara Sasak* is in teaching in the classroom, as represented in textbooks such as Sofii and Parman (1994). Some Sasaks I have interviewed were exposed to the script at school but none of them, apart from individuals who are interested in reading lontar, have a functional knowledge of the script and are able to read and write it. I understand that it is no longer being taught in most schools in Lombok, even though under *autonomi daerah* 'regional autonomy' local culturally and linguistically significant materials can be included in school curricula. Notice that the approach to teaching *Aksara Sasak* is rather unengaging and rushes through the principles of the script in very few pages – the textbook is full of *alus* non-low language, which is typically associated with the *menak* nobility, and the Latin-based transcription does not align with other spelling for Sasak. Also, the materials are hypertraditional with images of traditional Sasak dress and rural activities, along with schooling, being the only ones presented, as in Figure 8. This surely creates an association in the minds of children, especially those in urbanised village and town settings, between *Aksara Sasak* and a way of life that is long gone on Lombok as a daily lived experience.

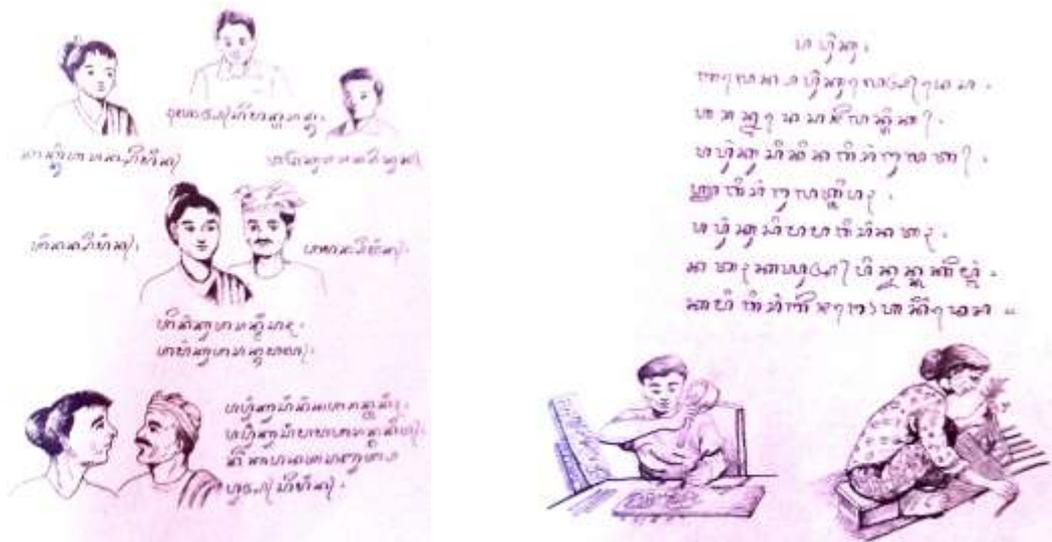


Figure 8. Hypertraditionalised textbook materials

### 4.3 Iconic function

Finally, *Aksara Sasak* seems to be used occasionally for iconic purposes in the context of promotion of *Adat Sasak* ‘Sasak tradition’. I witnessed an example of this on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2012 when I attended a meeting of *Majelis Adat Sasak Paer Timuq* (Sasak Tradition Group, East Division) in Selong, east Lombok.<sup>8</sup> This group is led by local *menak* Sasak nobility (see Figure 9) and included writing in *Aksara Sasak* on the banner displayed at their event. See Figure 10 (note also the Arabic writing to ensure signaling of Islamic identity).



Figure 9. Sasak menak at MAS meeting in Selong

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to the assistance of Nur Ahmadi and Wiwik Widiawati.



**Figure 10. Banner at MAS meeting in Selong and closeup showing Aksara Sasak**

In discussions during the meeting the need to promote Sasak tradition was emphasised by the participants, including the brother of the provincial governor who opened proceedings, however their statements about language promotion were vague and did not include promotion of knowledge and use of *Aksara Sasak*. We can conclude then that the level of interest in the writing system, even among an otherwise highly committed group such as this, is low and that there is little support for it or for promoting its wider use.

Note that unlike in Bali, I know of no other examples of *Aksara Sasak* used in public or private signage in Lombok. This is strikingly different from Arabic script which is widely seen throughout the island (and also limited use of Chinese characters in Ampenan and the Chinese cemetery). I suspect that this may be at least partly because *Aksara Sasak* is associated with Balinese and with non-Islamic religious traditions (including also the syncretic version of Islam called *wetu telu* practised by a small number of communities on Lombok) that are negatively evaluated by mainstream spokespersons, especially those supporters of more conservative approaches to Islam.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper is a preliminary outline of the history, structure and functions of *Aksara Sasak*, an alphabetic writing system that the Sasak borrowed from the Balinese, probably during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Lombok was dominated by the Balinese kingdoms, primarily as a means of writing literature on dried lontar palm leaves. In the 1970s copying of lontar texts onto paper for dissemination, teaching and use in reading performances saw the script used in another medium, which continues today among some individuals and groups interested in performing traditional reading events, although other performers now rely on Latin-based transliterations of the original lontar. Teaching of *Aksara Sasak* was introduced into primary schools in the 1990s and some textbooks created, however this had little impact in terms of spreading functional literacy in the script. It appears that today *Askara Sasak* is no longer taught in schools. A final use of it is purely iconic in relation to promotion of *Adat Sasak* ‘Sasak tradition’, with little or no interest among the promoters in support for the script itself. Knowledge of *Aksara Sasak* and the scribal tradition within which it was developed and functioned for several centuries has severely diminished on Lombok, and today both the script and its functions are endangered and likely to disappear in the foreseeable future.

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