

Challenges and prospect of maintaining Rongga: an ethnographic report

I WAYAN ARKA

This is the first ethnographic report of the documentation project on the Rongga language, which is a minority (Austronesian) language in Flores Indonesia (with around 4000 speakers). Various aspects of the language that appear to explain why this language and its cultural practices are being increasingly marginalised are reported. The report also discusses the community response to this and the prospects of maintaining Rongga in the future.

1 Introduction¹

Changes in the ‘ecology of languages’ after the independence of Indonesia have resulted in changes in the social, cultural and economic settings. These changes in turn have affected the well-being of indigenous languages and cultures right across the Indonesian archipelago. This has particularly been the case in the last thirty years under the harsh campaign of

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Indonesianisation through the rhetoric of *pembangunan* (development) in the New Order era of Soeharto's regime. Smaller indigenous languages such as Rongga, a minority language on the island of Flores, are particularly vulnerable.

Based on my first five-month fieldwork trip to Rongga territory, I will give my ethnographic account of certain external-community (or macro-level) factors (Grenoble and Whaley 1998). These factors follow along the various parameters such as demography, history, economics and (socio)politics that have resulted in the rapid marginalisation of the Rongga language and its culture. I will also discuss what has been done in the documentation project, in particular to help the local community and institutions to develop their awareness and skills for the maintenance of the language. The community response and the prospects of maintaining Rongga in the future will also be discussed.

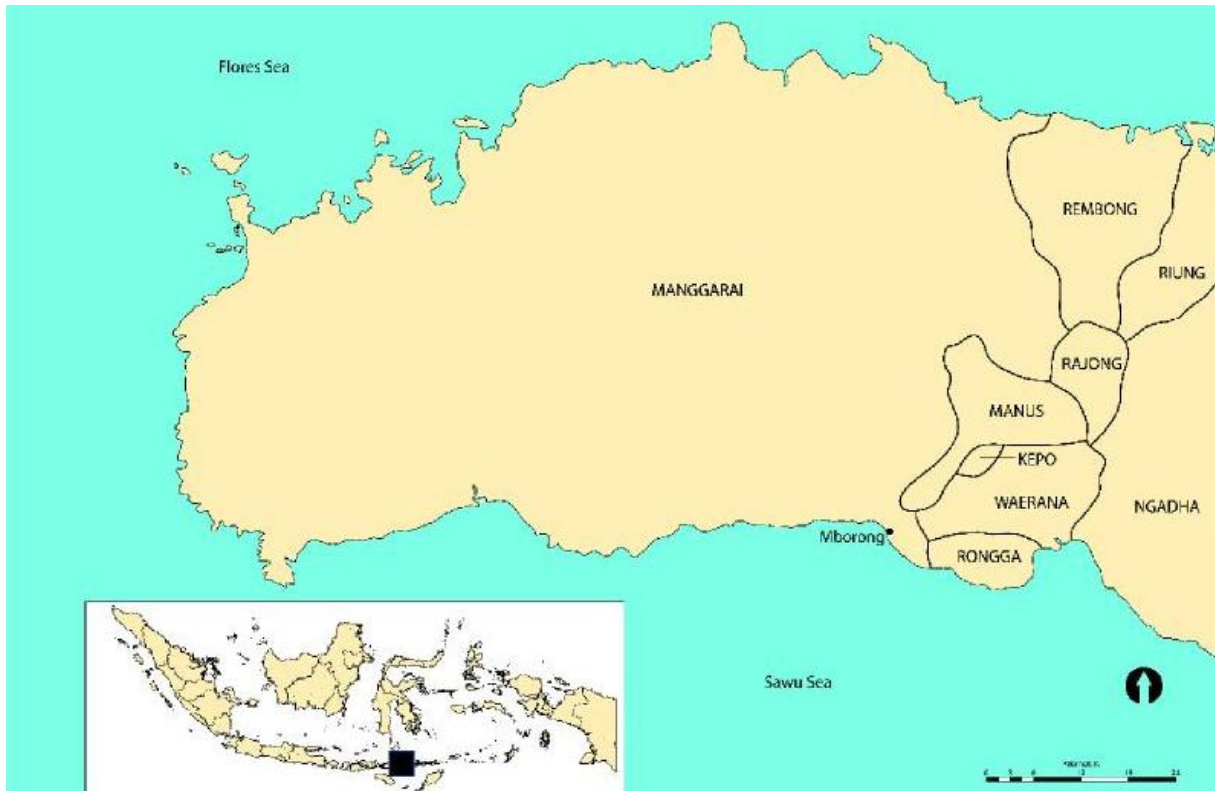
2 Geographical, socio-cultural and socio-linguistic setting of Rongga in Flores

Rongga is one of several small, undocumented Austronesian languages clustered in the eastern part of the Manggarai regency, between Manggarai² and Ngadha³, Flores island, Indonesia (Map 1). It is spoken by around 4000 speakers, mainly in the villages of Tanarata,

² Manggarai, the biggest language on the island, with more than half a million speakers (Arka and Kosmas 2002; Kosmas 2000) dominates the western part of Flores, namely in Kabupaten (regency). Manggarai is the largest regency of Flores (71,364 km²), almost one third of the total area of the island.

³ Ngadha with about 66,000 speakers (Djawanai 1983; SIL International 2001) is spoken in the regency of Ngadha, south central Flores. Alternative names for it are, among others, Ngada, Ngad'a, Nga'da and Bajawa.

Bamo, and Watungene, Kota Komba sub-district, in the regency of West Flores or Manggarai.⁴



Map 1. Rongga and its neighbouring languages in Flores, Indonesia

The eastern part of Manggarai is densely peppered with tropical forests and mountains.⁵ This has probably contributed to the considerable variation in culture and language among

⁴ It should be noted that Rongga belongs administratively to the regency of Manggarai, even though it is geographically in south central Flores. The term ‘west or western Flores’ is sometimes used throughout this document to include the area where Rongga is spoken. There is a plan to split Manggarai into three regencies: West, Central and East Manggarai, with the regency of West Manggarai already officially set up in late 2003.

these areas. Erb (1999:15-16), however, suggests that while there is considerable variation in the social and cultural landscape of the region, some commonalities in culture, social life and organization are also encountered. The commonalities (and complexities) of the language and culture in Flores in particular, and eastern Indonesia in general, have been investigated through comparative studies, revealing common categories such as clan systems and asymmetric marriages (de Josselin de Jong 1977; van Wouden 1968), metaphors encoded in dyadic forms (Fox 1980, 1980), and source/origin structures with ‘the house’ being an important category (1980; 1993; 1995; 1996; Fox 1980; Molnar 1998; Tule 1998).

The linguistic situation in Flores reflects a complex network of communalects with boundaries between languages often difficult to draw. The relationship between Rongga and the neighbouring languages is not yet clearly understood. Drawing on the notions of dialect chain, network and linkage⁶ from the historical comparative linguistic work in the Austronesian studies of Oceania, in particular from Ross (1987) but also Pawley (1996), Fox (1998) suggests that Flores can be sub-grouped into at least four basic linkages (from the west to the east): i) the Manggarai linkage, ii) the Central Florenese linkage, iii) the Sikka Linkage and iv) the Lamaholot Linkage. However, the description of the small languages at

⁵ It also has the highest rainfall in Flores, generally during the rainy season (January-April). Thus, people in the area (and in west Flores in general) mainly depend on agriculture, with rice as the main crop, supplemented by corn, cassava and sweet potatoes.

⁶ A linkage can be defined as a grouping of related languages comprised of once contiguous or near contiguous speech communities with dialects (or ‘communalects’) that have, over time, differentiated from one another. Linkages can be ‘chains’ (i.e. grouping adjacent distinct speech communities located along an extended area such as a coastline where mutual intelligibility is maintained with the neighbouring speech communities on both sides) or ‘networks’ (i.e. a more complex grouping of speech communities with a multiple-way communication). See Ross (1987) for details and discussions.

the far eastern end of the Manggarai Linkage, on the border between Ngadha and Manggarai (Mukun, Waerana, Rajong, Kepo, etc.) is almost unavailable. These languages therefore remain unclassified. While a complete description cannot be given at the moment, as the Rongga project has just started, Rongga (located in this border area) appears to be more like the languages to the east, e.g. Ngadha and Lio, rather than Manggarai; hence it seems to belong to the Central Florenese linkage. The evidence for this comes from the fact that there is some degree of mutual intelligibility between Rongga and Ngadha/Lio rather than between Rongga and Manggarai.⁷

One important aspect highlighted by Fox (1998:2), but not applicable in the Oceania case, is a sociolinguistic dimension that is fundamental to dialectal differentiation in (eastern) Indonesian languages, and especially in Florenese languages. Fox suggests that this is associated with the relatively complex nature of the state structures and ritual polities with a variety of status systems that have existed in the region over a considerable period of time. These have all influenced the development of the local languages. As a result, one particular dialect has been elevated to become a dialect of higher status, which therefore tends to be

⁷ The differences in grammar, for example, include basic vocabularies such as pronominal systems and negative particles:

Rongga:	<i>ja'o</i> '1SG'	<i>kita</i> '2SG.polite.address'	<i>mbiwa</i> 'not'
Ngadha	<i>ja'o</i> '1SG'	<i>jita</i> '2SG'	<i>iwa</i> 'not'
Manggarai	<i>aku</i> '1SG'	<i>ite</i> '2SG.polite.address'	<i>toe</i> 'not'

With respect to pronominal forms, Manggarai has rich cliticisation, which is absent in both Rongga and the neighbouring languages to the east.

Phonologically, Rongga is unusual in that it shows an approximant [ɹ], not found elsewhere in Flores. It also retains prenasalised stops systematically, generally lost in many corresponding words in Manggarai and Ngadha. Like Ngadha and Keo (Baird 2002), Rongga has preglottalised stops.

used over a wider area than where it was originally or regularly spoken. Such a dialect may become a mini lingua franca across dialect chains, which then masks the extent of the underlying dialect differentiation. Among the neighbouring languages of Rongga, Manggarai is certainly the major one. The central Manggarai dialect of Ruteng, the capital town of the regency, has gained wider intelligibility and elevated status as a regional lingua franca in west Flores, due to the influence of the Catholic mission and the advanced training schools centered in Ruteng.

There is a sort of hierarchy of lingua francas, ranging from Indonesian through Manggarai to Mbaen (also called Wae Rana, see Figure 1). While the central dialect of Manggarai has elevated status (Fox 1998), Indonesian is certainly the most prestigious and the most commonly used language of wider communication, both regionally and nationally. For many people of Flores in general, acquiring Indonesian is a real need as they have to communicate with outsiders for their daily needs: many of the government officials, doctors, lawyers, solicitors, teachers, and merchants or traders are non-Florenese people.

Mbaen is also used as a 'limited mini-lingua franca', which is more limited than Manggarai. It is reported that Mbaen, not Rongga (or any other small language) is most likely to be used for inter-ethnic communication among the small communities. Mbaen has more speakers than Rongga. Furthermore, Mbaen also appears to be elevated to the status of mini-lingua franca in the area. This status is 'lower' than Manggarai, which is in turn 'lower' than Indonesian, perhaps due to the fact that Rongga-koe, the territory of Mbaen, historically used to be the administrative centre of the old principality known as *kedaluan*.

The full picture of the sociolinguistic variables that determine language choice in the small contiguous multilingual societies of central Flores remains to be investigated. My short, five-month fieldwork suggests that the language choice in the area is indeed a complex matter.

The first factor appears to be familiarity of the speaker with the addressee: an unknown addressee (depending on his or her appearance) is most likely first addressed in Indonesian, then in Manggarai. A known addressee from a neighbouring language such as Mbaen, is generally spoken to in Mbaen by a Rongga speaker. This is what I observed when I travelled with my Rongga research assistant. This is not surprising since the Rongga people are generally multilinguals especially those from the village of Tanarata, speaking not only Rongga and Indonesian, but also the neighbouring languages such as Mbaen and Manus. The formality of the setting, e.g. schools and government offices, is also a variable that prompts the use of Indonesian rather than the local language. While other variables such as age, seniority and politeness appear to be at play as well, these variables need to be further investigated.

Given the dialect chains and the sociolinguistic dimension just outlined, it is often not easy to answer the question whether two or more neighbouring speech communities belong to the same language or are simply different dialects of the same language. Rongga, for example, is not included in Wurm and Hattori (1981), or in Blust's (1993) Central-Malayo Polynesian (CMP) sub-grouping, or in Fernandes' (1996) Flores language sub-grouping. Apparently, the exclusion of Rongga is due to the absence of information on this language.

Verheijen, who worked in west Flores as a Catholic priest for over fifty years, is unclear in his early work (e.g. Verheijen 1967) whether Rongga is a dialect of Manggarai. In his later work (Verheijen 1990:7), however, he notes that it is a language belonging to the Ngadha-Lio group. Grimes (1997) and SIL International (2001) list Rongga as a separate language and also provide a very brief description regarding its location and family affiliation within the CMP and Bima-Sumba group (following Jonker 1898). Antonius et al. (1997), however, regard it as a dialect of Ngadha but no supporting argument is given as to why this is the case.

Current studies on Manggarai and other languages of Flores (Arka and Kosmas 2002; Arka 2000, 2001; Kosmas 2000; Semiun 1993) and my preliminary investigation of Rongga seem to suggest that Rongga is more likely to be better considered a language than a dialect of Manggarai or a dialect of Ngadha. There is good evidence that Rongga is not a dialect of Manggarai: the Rongga and Manggarai communities are two different ethnic groups and most importantly their languages are mutually unintelligible to each other. The reasons why it should not be regarded as a dialect of Ngadha⁸ are as follows. Firstly, while it is true that it is similar to Ngadha in certain aspects, it is also quite distinct in other significant aspects. For example, Rongga's phonological system contains a phonemic approximant [ɹ] not found in Ngadha. The prenasalized stops are more systematic in Rongga than in Ngadha, e.g. *ndoi* 'money' (Rongga) vs *doi* 'money' (Ngadha). Secondly, a certain degree of similarity or mutual intelligibility that could be used for the claim that Rongga is a dialect of Ngadha is not good enough evidence. This is because a certain mutual intelligibility could also happen not only with Ngadha but also with other neighbouring languages geographically very close, such as Mbaen or other languages geographically more distant to the east such as Keo or Lio. This intelligibility could be due to language contacts over long periods and extensive multilingualism. Certain similarities of languages across Flores could be historically explained by the fact that (cf. Fernandes 1996) they came from the same parent language(s) in the past, within the Central-Malayo Polynesian sub-group of the Austronesian family. Secondly, the Rongga people consider themselves as a different group ethnically, and their language is different from Ngadha. Indeed, culturally Rongga is different from Ngadha in

⁸ There is no reference grammar of Ngadha, but a brief description of the Ngadha grammar can be found in Djawanai (1983)

one crucial aspect: the Rongga people are patrilineal, whereas the Ngadha⁹ people are matrilineal. Furthermore, the Rongga people practise the old ritual tradition of *Vera*, using the Rongga language.¹⁰ This tradition is not found in Ngadha.

3 Why has Rongga been marginalised so rapidly?

Community-internal and community-external factors for language maintenance or loyalty disadvantage Rongga. The following combined factors impose heavy pressure on Rongga: a negative attitude towards their language, the small size of the population, unstable bilingualism favouring Indonesian, unhelpful national and regional/local settings (e.g. the national language policy, its non lingua franca status, low participation in regional politics). While Rongga could still be termed healthy in the interior area, it can certainly be categorized as ‘endangered’ in the endangerment scales discussed in Crystal (2000:19-23) in certain parts of the Rongga territory.¹¹ Indeed, a shift to the neighbouring language of Mbaen has happened with the Rongga families living along the trans-Flores road, who are in close

⁹ Note that I use the term Ngadha to refer to the Ngadha ethnic group, also known locally as the Bajawa people. Ngadha is also used as a regency name, covering the territories of other ethnic groups such as Naga-Keo. Not all of these other groups are matrilineal, however.

¹⁰ It should be noted that *Vera* is in fact a ritual dance with ritual poetic language involved.

¹¹ It should be noted that the exact level of endangerment is not easy to determine because so many variables are involved (see the typology discussed in Grenoble and Whaley 1998). The levels discussed in Crystal (2000) are based on classifications proposed by different authors and simply provide broad definitions of certain levels. For example, on a five-level scale of (i) viable, (ii) viable but small, (iii) endangered, (iv) nearly extinct, and (v) extinct (based on Kinkade 1991), the endangered category is defined as ‘spoken by enough people to make survival a possibility, but only in favourable circumstances and with a growth in community support’.

contact (and intermarried with) the Mbaen people. While a complete shift from Rongga to another language (Mbaen or Indonesian) in all areas of Rongga is unlikely to take place in the immediate future, such a shift cannot be completely ruled out.¹² During my short fieldwork, I had many opportunities to investigate the psychosocial aspects that form the Rongga speakers' attitudes, which could lead to an 'easy' shift towards another language.

3.1 Psychosocial aspects

3.1.1 Cultural pride: interest, attitude, loyalty, motivation and identity

Except for the tradition of *Vera*, the Rongga people have nothing else to be proud of about their culture. They used to be proud of being experts at making *periuk tanah* (earthenware cooking pots), but this has long disappeared completely. Even the skills of performing *Vera* are not as well transmitted to the young generation now, and if nothing is done, the quality of this tradition will be eroding fast and it will also be without a future. My interviews with the young people confirm that they are not so interested in learning *Vera*.

¹² For example, a total shift to Indonesian is reported to have occurred in a very 'modern' environment, namely in relatively exclusive multi-ethnic housing complexes in the big cities. Joharnoto (2001) reports such a case in Semarang, the capital city of Central Java, where the children of young Javanese families have acquired Indonesian as their first language. He also reports that the perception of the parents that Indonesian is an important language for success in education and the future of their children, is a significant factor. This could not be envisaged as endangering Javanese, however, because the percentage of Javanese families living in this situation is small indeed. While this may appear to be quite a different situation from the current situation of Rongga, the similarity or lesson is that a high inter-ethnic contact, together with other sociolinguistic factors, may indeed lead to such a shift in a relatively short period of time, as reported by Bradley (1989) with his Ugong case.

There are at least two main, related reasons why *Vera* is now not well transmitted to the younger generation. The first reason is that it is regarded as a boring performance by the young generation. A young, married man commented:

Pak saya hanya nonton saja, tidak pernah ikut main. Hanya pembukaan dan penutup saja yang beda, yang ditengah-tengahnya itu, sepanjang malam sampai pagi sama. Oo...uu... nah itu sudah masuk ke Vera, lalu diulang-ulang. Di belakang mesti siap air panas untuk kopi agar orang tidak mengantuk. Kalau ada Vera tujuh malam berturut-turut, hanya pemainnya yang beda, vera yang dipertontonkan sama terus. Membosankan pak!

‘I do not participate, just watch it. Only its opening and closing parts are different. In between, all is the same from midnight till early in the morning. Oo..uu.. means that the Vera part starts, then everything is just repeated. Hot water must be ready in the kitchen because coffee must be served anytime to keep the people awake. When there are Veras for seven nights long, then only the dancers are different, all other things are the same. Really boring indeed!’

I was told that the old people were very enthusiastic to learn and dance *Vera* when they were younger. Things have changed now: the interests of modern life differ from those in the old days. The young people are more interested in modern western-style music (e.g. playing guitars), singing Indonesian pop songs, and dancing nationally popular dances such as *poco-poco*, rather than learning and practising their own traditional songs and dances.

The second (more serious) reason is language-related: the young generation now do not generally have the language skills needed to perform *Vera*. In addition to the dancing skill, performing *Vera* requires a mastery of the ritual form of the Rongga language. In the old days, the young (boys and girls, men and women) regularly watched (and then joined)

different kinds of *Vera* performances. This was then a natural way of learning it. This learning opportunity is not very available now for the young due to at least two reasons. First, the frequencies of the *Vera* performances are now much reduced in comparison to in the old days. Second, the kinds of *Vera* performed now are typically the ones that have to be performed in certain traditional *rumah adats* (clan houses) mainly for ritual reasons. This means that the ritual language is fixed (and typically hard for the young) and the dance is repetitious from midnight until the sun rises in the east. This is the kind of *Vera* that is regarded as ‘boring’ or ‘having no entertainment value’ by the young, as there is no room for personal creativity.

When the young people were asked about the significance of maintaining and learning *Vera* as part of their cultural inheritance, their answers were mixed. While admitting that *Vera* could signify their ethnic identity, many of them are now ignorant of it and assume no responsibility for maintaining it. They were surprised with my question about maintaining *Vera* and other aspects of their culture and language. There is an absence of some of the sense of cultural pride with the Rongga people. I also had the feeling that there was a lack of motivation in maintaining their culture/language.¹³ None of the Rongga people that I talked to (neither young nor old) had ever thought before about this matter, even though the older generation admitted that their culture and language were being eroded fast. No one (community leaders or government officials) ever raises this issue.

My language consultants admitted that the Rongga people do not have a strong loyalty to their language and culture: they value other’s more than their own and therefore could easily abandon their own identity and adopt the identity of other ethnic groups. This view is

¹³ This has slightly changed now, at least for a couple of educated Rongga people, especially after I talked to them about the background and rationale of my documentation research on their language and culture.

supported at least by the following facts. First, in inter-marriage families with Mbaen spouses in Tararata (one of the Rongga territories), the children typically first acquire Mbaen and therefore use Mbaen rather than Rongga more in the families.¹⁴ Secondly, a weak loyalty to their language and culture is also indicated by the fact that many Rongga people living side-by-side with the Mbaen people along the Trans-Flores road have shifted to become Mbaen-speaking people in one generation.¹⁵ Thirdly, the languages of other ethnic groups (Manus or Mbaen) are used even in certain *Vera* performances, particularly for the *danding* and *tandak* parts, which are performed between *Veras*. One of my consultants, an educated Rongga elder, Pak Thomas Bombang (now in his 70s), is very worried about the future of Rongga: he said that he had witnessed the rapid decline of the Rongga language and culture due to the lack of pride and loyalty of its people. He said that its fate would be like Maung, a neighbouring language located between the Rongga and Ngadha territories, which existed 25 years ago but has disappeared now, absorbed by the Mbaen language.

3.2 History

3.2.1 *Power and politics*

The current low-self esteem of the Rongga people appears to be historically rooted. Flores has had a long history of domination by ‘foreigners’, firstly by other ethnic groups in Indonesia, then later on by Europeans. In the 13th-15th centuries, the people of western Flores, including the Rongga, were under the influence of the Javanese Majapahit Kingdom. In the

¹⁴ It should be noted that the children in such families are also deliberately exposed to Indonesian from an early age by their parents at home, and also acquire Rongga later.

¹⁵ In the 1960s, the Rongga and Mbaen people living in the interior areas were forced to move down to the areas along the Trans-Flores road. This has resulted in a situation where they live together, side by side in certain areas along this road. Now, the Rongga people in the area are Mbaen-speaking people.

16th- 19th centuries, they were under the rival control of the kingdoms of Bima (from the neighbouring island of Sumbawa) and Goa (from south Celebes). During the 17th century the Dutch intervened and helped free the Bimanese from Goanese control. The Rongga people were under constant attack by other ethnic groups, particularly the Todo people from the west. Though the Rongga fought heroic fights, as recorded in the *Veras*, they lost the wars and were subject to slavery, e.g. many were sent by the Todos as slaves to Bima. At that time, cheap labour was demanded by the Dutch on their plantations in western Indonesia. This enslavement resulted in derogatory attitudes toward certain indigenous people of central-west Flores.

The sociopolitical influence of Goanese and Bimanese domination has been particularly significant in the establishment of traditional unities and social classes. Historically, three traditional social classes arose among the Manggarai: the *kraeng*¹⁶ (the descendant members of the dominant *daluglarang* clans), the *ata leke* (the commoner), and the slave.

Manggarai used to be divided into traditional unities incorporating around 39 principalities called *kedaluan*, headed by a *Dalu*. The area of the Rongga community belongs to the traditional *kedaluan* of *Rongga-koe*. When the Dutch colonial government decided to take direct control over Manggarai in early the 20th century, the Dutch maintained the traditional *kedaluan* system and kept the political subordination of the Rongga people under the king of Todo. Thus, the kings of Todo (and the Todo people) have been traditionally superior at the local level in Manggarai and have enjoyed power and modern education under the Dutch colonial system.

¹⁶ *Kraeng* is now used as a polite address form and the addressee does not necessarily have to be a descendant of a noble family.

The traditional *kedaluan* system continued up to the 1960s, long after the independence of Indonesia in 1945. The New Order government of Indonesia introduced reorganisation to Manggarai in 1970. Manggarai became a regency and a new village administration (*desa gaya baru*) was introduced with the leader being elected by the people. In modern Indonesia, education is important for strategic positions even at the local regency level. Unfortunately, not many Rongga people are well-educated and therefore taking strategic positions and power at the local government level. Given the tradition of local politics where ethnic loyalty is important, and given that the Rongga people are the minority in Manggarai, their interests at the local regency level are not generally taken care of. I could see that there is a sense of inferiority, helplessness, and frustration. The feeling of marginalisation in the past continues in modern Indonesia.

The modern state of Indonesia turns out to have destroyed the traditional system that appeared to have worked well in the past in maintaining the integrity of the Rongga culture and language. The Rongga territory (now shrinking) is still relatively vast. In the past, there was a traditional system integrating or connecting groups of the Rongga that were scattered in the Rongga territories. This still worked under the *kedaluan* system. In modern Indonesia, however, the introduction of *desa gaya baru* or *kelurahan* (Javanese-based village systems) has resulted in the collapse of the traditional local system. The territories of the Rongga people have been split and disconnected. Any internal communication among the clans or groups of the Rongga people has ceased to exist. The traditional mechanism is no longer in place to regulate common interests. When disputes (particularly land disputes) arise, they can no longer be settled as in the old days. There has been a breakdown in the unity of the Rongga people. Such unity is needed however, in order to compete with other ethnic groups at the regional level. The Rongga people now appear to have become too occupied in internal

conflicts and rivalries among clans, rather than in fighting for their common interests against other ethnic groups to get a share of the *pembangunan* (development) at the local level in modern Indonesia.

To conclude, the Rongga people are a politically weak minority group, losing the fight for control over resources at the local regency level. The central government in Jakarta has allowed greater autonomy than before to the regency government, which should have provided golden opportunities for cultural and language maintenance/revival programs.¹⁷ This has not happened so far and is unlikely to happen in future for the Rongga people because priority is unlikely to be given to the Rongga people by non-Rongga decision makers in Manggarai. It therefore seems to be too much of an expectation that the Rongga people will be able to maintain their culture and language as they do not have the motivation and resources to do so.

3.2.2 Development, Indonesianisation and the national/regional language policy

Soon after former president Soeharto and his New Order regime took power in the late 1960s, he launched the so-called *pelita* (*Pembangunan Lima Tahun*, successive five-year development plans) funded by oil money. One of the profound effects of Soeharto's *pembangunan* has been the infrastructure development and rapid improvement of the standard of living. This includes improvements in the transportation sector that has very much reduced the isolation of certain areas. As a result, the mobility of people has been significantly increased. The areas where the smaller languages of Rongga, Rajong and Kepo' are spoken

¹⁷ In other parts of Indonesia, there appears to be good news for cultural and language maintenance programmes. For example, the Balinese people and the local government of Bali have successfully launched different kinds of language maintenance programs, e.g. regular seminars (or congresses) on Balinese, Bali TV, teaching materials development, and speech contests in Balinese.

used to be very isolated, but that has changed since the 1980s when new roads were opened. The Rongga community has become less isolated, and therefore undergone more changes than the other small communities in the area, such as the Rajong and Kepo', because of its close proximity to the trans-Flores road. In particular, Tanarata—one of the territories of the Rongga—is just located along the Trans Flores road. It is closer to the sub-district town of Borong than the villages where Rajong and Kepo' are spoken.¹⁸ Tanarata is the place where the Catholic schools are located, and where people from other parts of Flores come for education. The Rongga people in Tanarata therefore have more contact (and intermarriage) with outsiders than the Rajong or Kepo' people, or the Rongga people in the interior places such as in Nangarawa. It is therefore not surprising that a rapid change to the Rongga culture and language has already taken place in Tanarata. Many old Rongga people that I talked to confirmed that their language and culture in Tanarata have eroded a lot, e.g. the young speak a mixed language (not a proper Rongga language), and people do not practice the correct *adat* (custom) ceremonies, etc.

Another profound effect of Soeharto's *pembangunan* is the systematic Indonesianisation by which there has been an unprecedented, accelerated marginalisation of the language and culture of minority groups in Indonesia. This has happened to the Rongga. In the name of development, Soeharto gave priority to national stability and tried to maintain power through the total control of the people by any (and sometimes brutal) means. The official government interpretation of national identity has been imposed and legitimized, whereby the national culture (and language) is the superordinate of local cultures (languages). In addition, the 1945 constitution has legitimised the official language policy, which explicitly states that

¹⁸ Transportation between villages is still in most cases difficult though, due to the rough roads in mountainous, tropical climates.

Indonesian is the national and official language. The Indonesian language, therefore, has all kinds of institutional support to be developed, standardized and used throughout Indonesia, particularly in the domain of education where it is compulsorily used from an early level and throughout all levels up to university. The language policy has led to the widespread acceptance of Indonesian as the language of the authorities (and by extension the language of the elites and the educated) (see Abas 1987 for further historical details) at the expense of the small languages like Rongga. The adverse impact of the language policy on the local language was not something that the founders of the Republic of Indonesia would have directly intended, because the 1945 constitution in fact guarantees the life of the local language.¹⁹

Indonesian is a language that one must acquire to gain economic and political benefit in modern Indonesia. The small children of the family that I lived with in Tanarata already spoke fluent Indonesian, even before they went to the kindergarten. I often conversed with them in Indonesian. The parents told me that they deliberately exposed the children to Indonesian from early childhood as this will be good for their success at school and in their future.

In contrast, local languages, particularly small minority languages like Rongga, are typically considered to be of no economic value²⁰ and generally not used or taught in

¹⁹ The ‘unintentional’ demise of minority languages as a result of language policies is perhaps not unique to Indonesia. It is reported, for example, to have happened in the former USSR and in the People’s Republic of China (Grenoble and Whaley 1999).

²⁰ That is, they have no value for getting jobs, generally even within their local communities.

schools.²¹ Strict Indonesianisation at schools was harshly implemented in the 1980s in Tanarata. I was told stories about how children were forbidden and physically punished (e.g. forced to eat chillies) simply because of using Rongga at school. While this is not the case now, the damage has already been done: the people have developed a negative attitude towards their own language, and this is hard to undo in the present climate.

The government has recently encouraged the use and teaching of the local language in the early years of elementary schools as part of the so-called *muatan local*, abbreviated as *mulok* (local contents), incorporated into the national curriculum. The implementation of this for Rongga faces at least four problems. First, Rongga is not the chosen language for the *mulok*. The local language policy is to choose the locally dominant language, Manggarai, as the language for *mulok*. Therefore, Manggarai is taught at schools, including schools in the Rongga territory. Second, the local language policy means that resources for teaching materials and curriculum development are made available for the Manggarai language. No resources are available for Rongga. My interviews with the elementary school teachers across Rongga territories revealed the difficulties they face if they want to teach Rongga as the *mulok*. While they do understand the significance of teaching Rongga to the Rongga children, they do not generally have the time and resources to prepare the teaching materials. Third, the teachers generally keep teaching Manggarai for a practical reason: they do not want their students to fail when they sit for the *mulok* test. The test follows the curriculum and guidelines set for the Manggarai language, not for the Rongga language. Fourth, in many cases, no qualified teacher of Rongga is available as the majority of the teachers in the Rongga territories are non-native speakers of Rongga.

²¹ A local language was used as the language of instruction in the first year of elementary schools in the late 1960s. This has changed; Indonesian is now used, even from kindergarten.

The institutional privilege enjoyed by the national language (Indonesian), and to some extent by big regional languages such as Manggarai, has resulted in a gradual loss of contexts where the local minority languages/cultures such as Rongga can be used to effect. Kuipers (1998) concludes that the conception of the local language as being subordinate to Indonesian or as a part of the larger set of Indonesian languages is indeed one of (the linguistic) ideologies responsible for the marginalisation of Weyewa. This seems to be no different for Rongga.

It seems that nothing can stop the increasing adoption of Indonesian as the language of wider communication, partly because it has been successfully imposed and well accepted as a symbol of Indonesian state power. It is now almost inevitable that Indonesian will further invade even the traditional domains of Rongga. Almost all of my language consultants (who are mostly in their 50's or 60's) admit that it is hard for them now to speak wholly in Rongga. When they were asked to tell stories, they immediately wanted to edit the stories to clean up the Indonesian words. My observation in their meetings also suggests that they are more comfortable using Indonesian or freely mixing Indonesian with Rongga than speaking wholly in Rongga.

The Indonesian language could be a threat even for the specialized poetic or ritual forms of a local language. Such ritual expressions in Rongga (known as *Vera*) and in other languages in the area, are regarded as a 'high' register. Interestingly, the highest register now seems to correspond with the highest (Biblical) Malay register in Rotinese²² (Fox 1982) or standard

²² An Austronesian language spoken by around 130,000 speakers in the neighbouring island of Roti, south-west of Timor (SIL International 2001; Grimes et al. 1997; Wurm and Hattori 1981).

Indonesian, as in Lamaholot²³ (Lutz 1998). Indonesian is also used in the *Vera* of Rongga, particularly in the *haimelo* type. Kuipers (1998) documents the increasing use of Indonesian and a decline of such ritual speech in Weyewa and explains it with reference to linguistic ideologies. According to his research, during the ideological dynamics created by changing the institutional arrangement in contemporary Indonesia, there has been an ‘erasure’ process (p.152) whereby certain authoritative ritual genres are ‘invisible’, marginalized, and no longer practised. However, while the extent of this impact for Rongga is yet to be investigated in all kinds of the *Vera* ritual forms, what seems to be clear at the moment is that Indonesian cannot wholly replace the role of the local poetic or ritual forms. They belong to what Woodbury (1998) calls ‘form-dependent expressions’. They are socially significant in order to express certain culturally specific feelings and functions. The ritual forms of the languages in the eastern islands of Indonesia are highly elaborated and structured in formulaic phrases and parallel verses (Fox 1974:73; Foley 1997:369-370; Fox 1982; Lutz 1998). The *Vera* ritual forms in Rongga also share these characteristics. The following are sample verses of the *Vera* of the history of the Motu clan:

Motu Weka ndili mai, weka ndili mai Jawa

name name down come name down come Java

‘The Motu Weka who came here (were) the (Motu) Weka from Java’

Rajo ngazha Milo Motu, tu ndele Sarikondo

boat name name name land north name

‘(Their) boat called Milo Motu landed in Sarikondo’

²³ An Austronesian language, spoken in the east tip of Flores and in the adjacent small islands such as Adonara and Solor; 150,000 speakers (SIL International 2001; Grimes et al. 1997).

Sarikondo mosa me'a, tei motu stana mezhe

Name male alone see name as.big.as big

‘Sarikondo itself was well-known, and the Motu grew big’

Motu Woe limazhua, embu me'a Sunggisina

name friend seven grandmother alone name

‘The Motu were seven brothers, descendents of Sunggisina’

Motu Woe limazhua, beka sogho wae kodhe

name friend seven break because water monkey

‘The Motu were seven brothers, but they were split because of fighting for monkey soup’

The following is a different kind of *Vera* showing ancient advice:

Lo resi mbojo, mudha ngata lima lua

Body drizzle tired luck person hand hair

Weki resi semi, mudha ngata lima lua

Body drizzle tired luck person hand hair

‘Something hard should be done without thinking of something in return’

The following should be noted from the structure of the *Veras* shown above. First, each line consists of two parts (separated by a comma in the written fragments above), and each part generally consists of four (or three) two-syllable words. Second, typical are parallel lines repeating words of exactly the same form, e.g. *Motu Woe limazhua* in the first *Vera*, and *muda ngata lima lua* in the second one. Alternatively, the parallel lines may consist of

synonymous words, e.g. the expressions of *Lo resi mbojo* and *Weki resi semi* in the second Vera both mean the same thing.

3.3 Local economy and economic gain in preserving one's culture and language

The majority of the Rongga are peasants, practising traditional agriculture (growing rice, coffee, corn, sweet potatoes, cassavas, and recently vanilla). They generally struggle for daily life and to get enough food to eat. Because of the poverty, they do not generally think of cultural and linguistic maintenance as their priority. In their view, there is no point in doing things that have no economic gain. When I joined the local Catholic youth organisation on their picnic, I was asked to explain to them and to convince them why it is important to maintain Rongga, a small language of no value. I'm not sure whether they were convinced after my lengthy explanation.

3.4 Demography

The low number of Rongga speakers (around 4,000) by itself is not an indicator of endangerment because even a number of 500 speakers may turn out to be healthy, e.g. in the context of Pacific languages (Grimes 1995). In the context of Rongga, however, the small size of the population is indeed critical given other factors previously outlined, namely: the speakers' attitude and the national, regional and local settings that already disadvantage it. While the numbers of Rongga people has been relatively steady during the last thirty years, there has been an increase in the number of non-Rongga migrants, living in groups, particularly around Kisol and Tanarata. This has led to an increase in the heterogeneity of the ethnic groups, hence in multilingualism, as evident from the statistics, e.g. at the primary school in Tanarata. Around 10% of the current students enrolled at that school are from non Rongga backgrounds. Furthermore, there has been evidence that bilingualism leading to a total shift to the bigger and stronger language of Mbaen has been recently recorded in the

history of Rongga along the Trans-Flores road in Rongga territory. Thus, the small size of population of a 'weak' language like Rongga could be indeed a major factor for stable bilingualism, where the functions of competing languages are complementary. When there is a shift in the social division of these functions, then this means that one language expands at the expense of another. Shrinking domains for home language transmission where the size of population is critical are already reported, for example, in the eastern African context (Dimmendaal 1989), where certain speech communities of hunter-gatherers have lost their identity and dissolved into other societies.

4 Prospects

Rongga is relatively healthy only in certain places at the moment, particularly in its core interior territories, e.g. the southern part of the village of Bamo, but it is endangered in other parts, such as in Tanarata. The prospect of its survival appears to be quite faint since even Rongga in the interior parts is now under serious threat due to the opening of a big new road and also an upgrade of the existing ones for a mining project. These roads run through the interior parts of the Rongga territories from Tanarata to Tanjung Bendera. The road construction has already started in May 2004. This is the first step towards providing the infrastructure for the mining projects of gold, iron and uranium in Tanjung Bendera and the surrounding areas. If this is really implemented, then the ecology of Rongga will be radically changed. This could accelerate the demise of the Rongga language and culture. Note that Rongga in the interior has been preserved due to the geographical isolation. The removal of this isolation due to the construction of good new roads, and the possible influx of new migrants due to the mining industry would further endanger the already threatened language. The profound linguistic effect of the 'opening up' of geographical isolation that results in

language ‘death’ has been recorded with Ugong, a minority language in Thailand (Bradley 1989). The position of Rongga in relation to the national language (Indonesian) is very much like Ugong in its relation to Thai. Bradley reports that the recent opening of new roads has resulted in unprecedented intensified contact with Thai, which then boosted a rapid change towards the convergence of the language with Thai. In just over a decade, certain dialects in certain locations are reported to be virtually dead. The same is very likely to happen with Rongga in its relation with Indonesian, as there will be accelerated contact with mining workers and workers of related services and industries who most likely come from all over Indonesia. Given the weak loyalty of its speakers and the unfavourable socio-political, demographic and economic factors at the national and regional levels so far described, I doubt whether Rongga would be able to survive.

5 Challenges and community response

There are at least two related vital tasks in a language maintenance or revival program: i) how to create favourable socio-political and socio-economic conditions such that the well-being of the language is adequately looked after, and ii) how to address psycho-social problems to boost the language loyalty of its speakers. The success of a language maintenance program therefore, needs an integrated approach by interested parties because most of the issues are essentially non-linguistic in nature and therefore cannot be solely handled by linguists.

Given the current socio-political and economic climate in Indonesia and particularly in Manggarai, it is certainly too much to expect that the local government would divert a significant portion of its financial resources for language and cultural maintenance programs. As part of my Rongga project, I managed to talk to the relevant government institutions such

as the *Litbang* (the government body for research and development), the *Dinas pendidikan dan pengajaran* (the department of education) and the tourism board, alerting them of the prospect of extinction of a minority language and culture like Rongga. I also tried to convince them how important it is to look after the language and to provide some help. It appears that my message has gone through: the rationale of the project was well reported in the local newspaper and the Bupati (i.e. head of the local regency government) was also quoted as referring to the Rongga project at least in one of his speeches. While this is certainly not enough, there has been a positive shift towards a growing awareness among the local authorities, which hopefully could develop some appropriate, favourable socio-political conditions.

One of the goals of the Rongga project is to help the Rongga people with the development and production of teaching materials to be used at schools. For this, folktales and other texts have been collected. Discussions with the local teachers of Rongga have been organised. I have also approached the PEP (Primary Education Project)²⁴ in Bajawa for cooperation. The challenge is how to ensure that the Rongga people can continue the language maintenance program well after the current Rongga project is over.

The response that I received from the Rongga elders and intellectuals has been generally positive, especially after I explained to them the purpose of the Rongga project, even though I was surprised with their initial passivity. Many of them expressed their willingness to cooperate. For example, some elders were willing to help the teachers at the primary school at Tanarata to organise a *Vera* performance by the students. The *Vera* was then performed at the commemoration of the *hardiknas* (education day) at the subdistrict Kota-Komba. All of the training and rehearsal processes as well as the actual show were documented using a

²⁴ This is a project funded by AusAid to have community-based education at a primary school level.

Digital Video camera. The recording was then replayed on the TV set to the people at Tanarata. The elders, parents and teachers were extremely enthusiastic and pleased with the show – it was their first experience of seeing their children performing *Vera*, which was subsequently recorded and then played back on the TV screen for all to enjoy. In addition, the performance was highly praised by the local authorities and non-Rongga on-lookers. I could see a sense of pride in the Rongga faces. This might seem to be a small thing that could boost their pride and loyalty to their culture and language, but it is something that we need for the success of a program of language and culture maintenance. There is now a plan to organise more *Veras* to be performed by the school children with additional *danding* and *tandak* dances. Initially some of the young people appeared to be sceptical about this sort of program. Nevertheless, after the success of the *Vera* show by the children, the local Catholic youth organisation now also wants to organise a similar show involving their members. It seems that it takes time to convince the young that maintaining their own language and culture is worth doing.

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