Documenting the linguistic diversity of Indonesia: Time is running out

Marian Klamer
Leiden University, The Netherlands

Published in: Santri E.P. Djahimo (ed.), 2018. *Proceedings of 'Revitalization of local languages as the pillar of pluralism'*, p. 1-10. [Proceedings of the International Conference on Local Languages, organized by APBL (Asosiasi Peneliti Bahasa-bahasa Lokal) & Nusa Cendana University, Kupang, 29-30 June 2018]. Salatiga: Satya Wacana Press.

1. Introduction

Between 1991 and 2018, I had the privilege to work with speakers of numerous local languages in eastern Indonesia -- both Austronesian and non-Austronesian. What has always struck me is that all these speakers were always happy to accept a foreign guest in their community, and very generously shared their knowledge about their language. I have often wondered whether any person in the Netherlands would be as generous and hospitable to a total stranger who would turn up at their doorstep asking to learn about Dutch. I suspect that in Holland, such a stranger would get a polite but quick "ehmm... no, no thanks!". The wonderful people of Indonesia make it the best place on earth to do linguisitc fieldwork. And the beautiful languages that are spoken there, make it worth it. I heard and transcribed many intriguing personal stories, historical narratives, mysterious folk tales, funny jokes, wise proverbs and beautiful hymns. I have enjoyed the slow ferry trips where people hang around sleeping, chatting and sharing biscuits, crowded bemo's with loud rock music and pleasant company, muddy rides on motor bikes followed by refreshing baths, and quiet nights with people gently snoring in the rooms around me.

In Sumba, I worked on Kambera, in Alor and Pantar I worked on Alorese, Teiwa, Kaera and Sar. This resulted in four grammatical descriptions (Klamer 1998, 2010, 2011, 2014). In Pura, I visited Blagar speakers; in East Flores, I did survey work on Hewa and Lamaholot-Lewoingu, in Adonara on Lamaholot-Adonara, in Lembata on Kedang (Klamer 2018), and in Kalabahi I worked on Alor Malay (Baird, Klamer, and Kratochvíl, n.d.). In addition, I have worked in Timor Leste to collect data on Mambai, Tetun Dili, Tokodede, Lakalai, Idate, Kemak, Tetun Terik, Bunak, Fataluku, and Makasae. All the recordings of these languages are -- or will be -- archived online and with Open Access, at the Language Archive of the Max Planck Institute Nijmegen (https://archive.mpi.nl/).[1] Anyone can download them for free. Another free open access source is *LexiRumah*, a database that my group and I have worked on, which currently contains 30,000 words from of over a hundred languages, linked to maps, metadata and sources (http://www.model-ling.eu/lexirumah/languages (Kaiping and Klamer 2017).

I would like to use the space generously alloted to me here to draw attention to the linguistic diversity of Indonesia, discussing the following questions: Why is documenting it important? (section 2), How do languages die? (section 3), Why is it a problem that languages die?

[1] See also the *CLARIN Virtual Language Observatory*, https://vlo.clarin.eu/

(section 4), Can the development of new languages counterbalance the loss of languages? (section 5), and Are all languages equal? (section 6), ending with some concluding remarks (section 7).

2. Why is documenting the linguistic diversity of Indonesia important?

Indonesia is very rich in languages. It is important to document these languages while they are still spoken. The language map of the world is undergoing drastic changes. At the moment, according to the *Ethnologue* (Simons and Fennig 2018) there are some 7,097 languages spoken world-wide.[2] The geographic spread of these across the world is uneven. Some countries have many different languages, others have only a few. Indonesia has 707 living languages and is thus one of the richest countries of the world in terms of linguistic diversity. In contrast, Saudi-Arabia, for instance, only has nine languages (of which six are varieties of Arabic.) Apart from their geographically uneven spread, languages also show a huge variety in numbers of their speakers, as indicated in Table 1.

number of speakers[3]	number of languages
more than 100 million	8
10-99.9 million	72
1-9.9 million	239
100.000-999.999	795
10.000-99.000	1,605
1.000-9.999	**1,782**
100-999	**1,075**
10-99	**302**
1-9	**181**

Table 1. Numbers of speakers and languages in the world (Crystal 2000, 15; data of *Ethnologue* 1996).

On the one hand, there is a top-8 of big languages, each with more than 100 million speakers, namely Mandarin, Spanish, English, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, and Japanese. On the other hand, the numbers at the bottom half of the table, printed in bold, indicate that 3340 languges are spoken by less than 10,000 speakers. Most of the world's language diversity is thus found in relatively small speaker communities, and this makes it quite vulnerable.

[2] Another open access online resource of the world's languages is *Glottolog* (Hammarström et al. 2018).
[3] Here, the notion 'speaker' means 'speakers of mother tongue' or 'first language speaker'. Most people in the world speak at least one other language besides their 'mother tongue'; for instance, the national language, a trade language, the language of the neighbouring community, or the language of the other parent in case of bilingual marriages.

According to some pessimistic scenarios, 90% of the world's languages will disappear in the course of the 21st Century (Krauss 1992). More optimistic prognoses mention a 50% extinction rate in this century (Stephen Wurm, cited in Raymond 1998). Between now and the time when our great-grandchildren have children, 3,500-6,300 languages will die.

In Indonesia, speakers of local languages are increasingly using Indonesian with their children. Many of the children that I met during fieldwork still understand their parents' language but use Indonesian or the local Malay variety to answer to their parents and talk to their peers. As a result, these local languages are no longer passed on to the next generation, and will die when the adults of today pass away.

The *Ethnologue* (Simons and Fennig 2018, available at https://www-ethnologue-com) lists all the languages of Indonesia and gives an indication of how endangered they are, see Table 2. About half of the languages spoken in Indonesia are endangered, of which 10% is dying.

Languages in Indonesia	707			
	Not threathened	362		
	Endangered	**345**		**48.85 %**
	Threathened	203		28.7 %
	Shifting	69		9.8 %
	Nearly extinct	28		4 %
	Moribund	39		5.5 %
	Dormant	6		0.85 %

Table 2. Total number of living languages in the world and in Indonesia. The languages in Indonesia are split up according to their level of endangerment (Source: *Ethnologue* 2018, Simons and Fennig 2018).

The first two steps of a language in danger is when it is *Threatened* and *Shifting*. In both these situations, intergenerational transmission is in the process of being broken, but the child-bearing generation can still use the language. Since parents can still use the language, it is not too late to restore natural intergenerational transmission in the home. Revitalization efforts could achieve this by focusing on the motivations of parents, and informing them about the benefits of bringing up children bilingually. For example, in Indonesia many parents speak Indonesian to their children because that is the language of education, and they think that speaking it well will help their children to do better in school and get a better career. However, there is much research showing that children who grow up bilingually, with different languages at home and in school, manage just as well as monolingual children. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence that such children even have cognitive advantages, and perform better in certain cognitive and verbal tasks (Blom et al. 2014, and references cited therein). So if parents are encouraged to use the home language with their children and also support them in doing their best in school using Indonesian, these children will be advantaged rather than disadvantaged, and the local languages can stay alive.

The next three categories in Table 2 (*Nearly extinct*, *Moribund*, and *Dormant*) indicate languages that are dying. In these situations, the child-bearing generation is no longer able to

transmit the language to the next generation, since the only fluent users (if any remain) are above that age; for instance, the generation of grandparents. Revitalization efforts would need to develop mechanisms outside the home in order to transmit the language.

A situation of language endangerment is not only caused by parents who no longer transmit their language to children. Past experiences with the indigenous languages of North America and Australia suggest that the size of a language community is also important. In general, a language appears to need a minimal number of 1,000 speakers to be transmitted to the next generation; languages with fewer speakers are more likely to be lost. Of the 345 languages in Indonesia that are "endangered", 50% has less than 1,000 speakers, and 80% has less than 10,000 speakers. This suggests that that at least half of all the endangered languages in Indonesia are going to die within a generation or two.

no. of speakers	no. of languages	% of 354 Indonesian endangered languages
less than 500	128	37 %
less than 1,000	174	50 %
less than 5,000	254	74 %
less than 10,000	275	80 %

Table 3. Numbers of speakers of Indonesian languages that are endangered

Because only a small portion (at most 10%) of the 707 languages in Indonesia have been described, revitalization efforts are to be combined with documentation and description of the languages. Such work will enable speakers to write their language, so that can write down their oral history, traditional stories, songs and poems for future generations. It also enables them to use their language in Whatsapp or text messages. When there is a script, speakers can be encouraged to compile dictionaries so their vocabulary of e.g. plants and animals is documented. Dictionaries also help the younger generation to see how Indonesian words are translated into the local language, and vice versa.

If some of Indonesia's linguistic wealth is to be preserved for future generations there is a lot of work to do, and little time left to do it. Linguistic documentation and description is labour-intensive, and it does not rank high on political-economic priority lists. And there are some people who consider efforts to support and revitalize local languages as a thread to the unity of Indonesia. We should try to convince those people that preserving Indonesia's cultural diversity and the intangible heritage of small communities is not a threat but an enrichment.

3. How do languages die?

A language dies with its last speaker. When Indonesian parents use Indonesian instead of the local language with their children, their children will not transfer the language to their grandchildren, so it will die out with the last of these parents.

There are many reasons why people stop using their language. In general, any circumstance that threathens people in their physical or mental survival will threathen the use of language. Languages are threathened when people die or migrate due to famines, earth quakes, or vulcanic eruptions, but also due to human intervention in the form of cultural oppression,

oppressie, deportation, genocide or war. Hundreds of such cases of language death have been documented all over the world; here I only describe a few examples in eastern Indonesia.

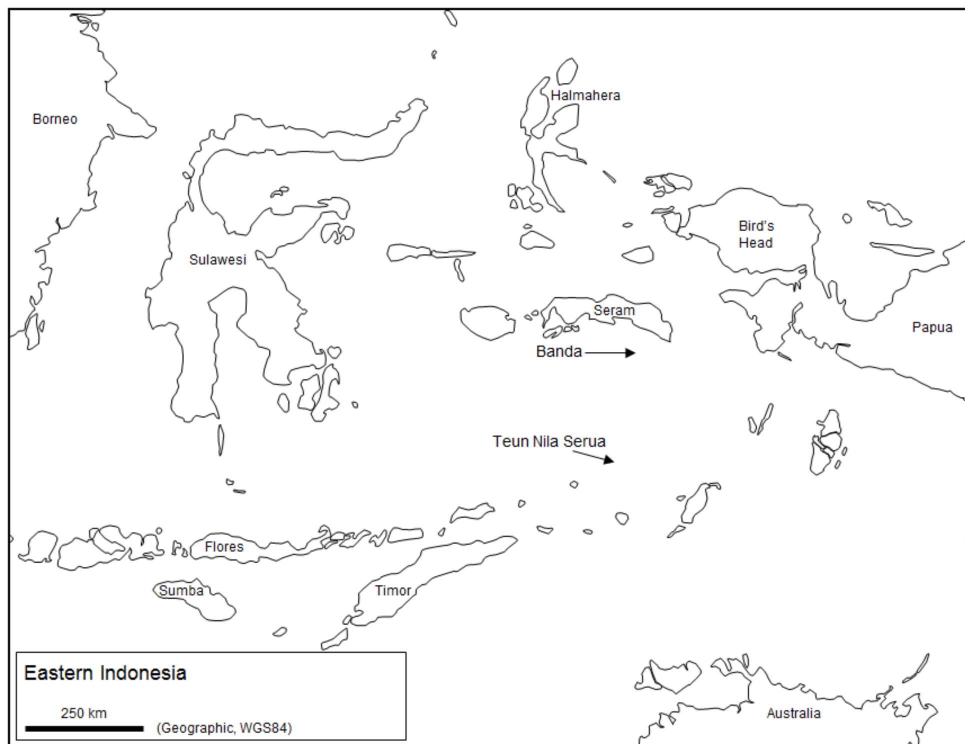

Fig. 2. Eastern Indonesia

The islands of Teun, Nila, and Serua (TNS) are located northeast of Damar Island, see Map 1. Between 1979-1983, speakers on the islands of Teun, Nila and Serua, located between Timor en Seram, have been resettled on the south coast of central Seram on the shores of the Elpaputi Bay due to volcanic activity on Nila and the severe water shortage on all three islands (Collins 1982, 125). Originally, Teun had 1.200 speakers, Nila 1.800, and Serua 2.000 (Collins 1982), but under influence of the Ambonese Malay variety spoken on Seram, these languages have now all disappeared, and are listed in the *Ethnologue* as "Extinct" . Although the incipient volcanic eruption was the reason why the Teun-Nilu-Serua sprekers moved, it was not the reason why they lost their languages. The real reason was that they become dispersed minorities on Seram who had to adapt to the language of the majority by speaking Ambonese Malay.

The language history of Leti, another Moluccan island, shows an opposite force. Here, newcomers arrived and changed the language situation of the island. From oral histories it is known that Letinese is the language of a group of immigrants who arrived long ago, sailing from the close-by island Luang to Leti. The immigrants were called the *Oraspou,* the 'boat owners'. The people they encounterd on Leti had their own language and were referred to as *Ornusa* 'land owners'. The boat owners quickly become more numerous than the land owners, but because of lack of space on the island of Leti, the minority of land owners could not retract to their own domain, so that both communities became mixed. The dominance of the boat owners became apparent when all expressions of the language or culture of the land owners was banned from public life, and had to be kept secret. This ultimately lead to the

current situation where on Leti, besides Letinese, another secret language is known to be associated with witches and demon expulsion. This secret language goes back to the language of the land owners (Engelenhoven 1995, 20; Engelenhoven and Hajek 2000, 112). In other words, on Leti, the newcomers marginalised the language that was originally spoken there.

In the past, the Dutch also had a hand in changing the linguistic landscape of Indonesia in a horrible manner. In 1621 the Dutch had a monopoly in nutmeg trade on the Banda islands, south of Seram. When local rulers opposed this monopoly, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, gouverneur-general in Batavia, as retribution to their resistance, murdered the Banda population and deported some of them as slaves. Of the 15,000 inhabitants of the Banda-islands, only 1,000 people survived. But the Dutch plantations in Banda needed workers, so they moved slaves from other islands (including Java, southeast Sulawesi, and Timor) to Banda. The new mix of people that arose on Banda started to use the trade language Ambon Malay as colloqual language, and so the original language of the Banda's disappeared from Banda. However, Collins (1982) reports that it is still spoken in Kei Besar, where the survivors of the massacre 400 years ago succeeded in reestablishing two villages, Eli and Elat. Clearly, military and political dominance are important factors in language loss, apart from economical, cultural and and numerical dominance.

4. Why is it a problem that languages die?

Why is it a problem that languages disappear? Isn't it true that the fewer languages there are, the better our communication will be, so that there will be more solidarity and peace? I think that Indonesia is an example that shows how naive this thought is. Virtually everyone in Indonesia speaks Indonesian, but does this mean that there are fewer fights between people? Speaking the same language does not automatically lead to better understanding, and is never a guarantee for peace. Just think of all the fights between couples or brothers or sisters who speak the same language. But if "the fewer languages, the better" is not true, that does not mean that the opposite " the more languages, the better" is true. Why is it bad that languages disappear?

For speakers, losing their language is usually a great loss. One's mothertongue is their best way to communicate their ideas, emotions and opinions, and using one's own language is the best way to transfer knowledge and learn new skills. In May 2018 I was asked to work with the last active speaker of the language Sar, spoken on Pantar. Bpk Endi Bolang came to Kupang to have his language documented. Together with Bpk. Amos Sir, we recorded a 600-word list and some short monologues. Bpk Endi described his situation as the last active speaker of Sar as follows in Sar, translated into colloquial Indonesian by Bpk Amos Sir:

Yea, nang, hmm na-traa' eta ga ge a... na was a na erra banna yang ba niraxau erra banna? Neeng na wultag, neeng walais, neeng waraqai. Ya la aang ga gamming aan pi traa' e ma ung telar, maang jadi traa' gam yesa e a suk ewar sir, suk ewar sir. A wa e maan ga gu gatta wan maang.

"Ya, saya, saya punya bahasa hilang itu karena... Saya pikir saya bikin hidup, tapi siapa yang dengan saya bikin hidup? Saya omong dengan diri sendiri, omong sendiri, dengar sendiri. Siapa yang sambut supaya bahasa kita ini baku balas, tidak ada sehingga bahasa yang ada ini turun kembali naik, turun kembali naik. Dia pergi-datang tidak punya tempat".

"Yes, my language will disappear because... I think I can make it live, but with whom do I do that? I talk with myself, speak to myself, listen to myself. Who responds so that our language will be used to talk to each other? There is no one, so our language here walks up and down, up and down... it comes and goes, has no place to stay."

Fig. 3. Documenting the Sar language of Bpk Endi Bolang, with Bpk. Amos Sir (Kupang, May 2018).

A language that is no longer used to communicate will die. With the language, unique cultural practices will also disappear, such as specific conventions on how to greet or address each other, how to say thank you. Also, language gives oral history encapsulated in myths and stories; language contains verbal rituals to mark life events of birth, marriage and death; language shapes religion and the verbal art of prayers, sayings, songs, poetry, spells, and word games; language provides descriptions of particular important routes using indigenous place names. All of these expressions will be lost when the language dies.

Language loss is a loss for the speakers themselves, but also because it affects the natural database of scientists who study human languages, histories and cultures. The more languages disappear, the less we can discover about the varieties of languages, histories and cultures of people in the world.

5. Can new languages counterbalance the loss of languages?

New languages are developing: for instance, English is changing into different varieties of "Englishes" under influence of the first languages of its speakers and their different ethnic backgrounds. Different "Englishes" are spoken by black and white people in the US. Also, the Englishes spoken in, for instance, Ghana, India, Hawaii and New Zealand have become virtually mutually unintelligble. In the same way, there are large differences between Indonesian as spoken in Jakarta, Makassar, Surabaya or Kupang -- in intonation, lexicon, and morphosyntax. It may very well be that the local varieties of "big" languages like English or Indonesian over timee turn into different languages. However, research that has studied the speed of language development suggests that, overall, new languages need more time to develop than just two or three generations. Also, the existence of a national language, such as Indonesian, which has a normative grammar and vocabulary that is taught in school, is a factor slowing down the possible diversification of local varieties. In general, the newly languages we see developing today cannot counterbalance in any way the massive language loss that will take place in the upcoming few generations. The 345 Indonesian languages that will be lost in the coming century will not be compensated by a significant number of newly developed languages.

6. Are all languages equal?

Languages are not all used in the same context and for the same purposes, so there are bound to be differences in their sounds, words and grammar. The linguistic diversity in Indonesia is so great because it is a country with thousands of islands and straits, and hundreds of big mountains and volcanoes. Such a geographical environment makes it easy for a group of speakers to move away from their original community to settle elsewhere and then loose contact. In the past, the languages in Indonesia could easily diversify in this way.

For a diverse nation like Indonesia, it is politically important to stress the cultural characteristics uniting groups, rather than to focus on variation among groups or diversity. I have heard linguists in Indonesia claiming that all the languages spoken in Indonesia are members of the same family, the Austronesian family, because Indonesian is Austronesian and no language spoken in Indonesia can therefore be anything other than Austronesian. To a linguist, this type of reasoning sounds odd because language families are established on linguistic motivations rather than political considerations. But also for non-linguists it is easy to see that the languages of Indonesia (except Indonesian itself, which was introduced quite recently!) were already spoken in the archipelago several thousands of years ago -- long before Indonesia became a nation. Moreover, Austronesian languages are not only found in Indonesia, but also in Madagascar, the Philippines, along the coasts of Papua New Guinea, in the Pacific and New Zealand, in Hawaii and in Easter Island. The vocabularies of all these

languages show remarkable similarities, even though they are thousands of kilometers apart. This is why we believe that they descended from a common ancestor language, proto-Austronesian. There are 1200 Austronesian languages (Tryon 1995), and they are spoken across half the globe, see Fig. 2. In other words, the languages that belong to the Austronesian family are not confined to Indonesia.

Fig. 4. Spread of Austronesian languages across half the globe

In addition, languages in Indonesia are not always part of the Austronesian family. There are several hundreds of languages spoken by Indonesians that are totally unrelated to Austronesian, and are referred to as 'Non-Austronesian' or 'Papuan'. These languages are not only spoken in Papua, but also in the provinces of Maluku and NTT.

Fig. 5. Spread of ‘non-Austronesian’ or ‘Papuan’ languages in red

From a linguistic point of view, NTT and Maluku are therefore very interesting provinces, because this is the area where the Austronesian and Papuan languages meet each other. Clearly, not all languages are equal, but all languages are equally important as the intangible heritage of their speakers.

7. Concluding remarks

The number of languages that are under threat in Indonesia is astonishing. We must try to convince all Indonesian parents who speak a local language to also use that language with their children, and maintain it as the home language. Let all the children whose parents speak a local language, grow up bilingually so they have a mother tongue besides the national language Indonesian. We must also encourage Indonesian citizens to start documenting their own local languages. If for each local language there is just one person who documents just some stories and a word list, we would see an incredible boost in efforts. Archiving these results would give a treasure chest for future generations.

This is why it is important to explain the facts about the Indonesian situation, and why it is necessary to provide training in how to do language documentation. An MA or PhD in Linguistics is not necessary to do documentation; what you need is some practical skills in how to make good recordings, how to translate and annotate them, and how archive them adequately with the metadata. Such a training does not need to take very long either. Together with colleages at the University of Hawaii and at Universitas Kristen Artha Wacana, from 7-13 May 2018 we co-organised a 7-day’s training workshop to learn to document minority languages in Nusantara Tenggara Timur. There were 29 students who participated in the training, and the results were amazing. Besides doing the training, the students also recorded, translated and annotated a story and a word list for 7 local languages spoken in and around Kupang: Helong Darat di Bolok, Uab Meto di Amarasi Nekmese, Abui, Termanu, Uab Meto di Burain, Sar, Rote Thie, and Rote Lole. These recordings will be archived with Paradisec (http://www.language-archives.org/archive/paradisec.org.au). It is our hope that because of experiences like this, there will be more and more young Indonesians who value their local languages as exponents of their unique intangible heritage, and who want to spend time documenting them. I also hope that we can convince more and more parents to use their local language with their children, because it is parents who hold the key to the local languages. If they don’t pass it on, it will die; if they teach it to their children, it will live. Only by such concerted efforts will it be possible to keep Indonesia’s rich linguistic heritage. Time is running out, but it is not too late yet.

References

Baird, Louise, Marian Klamer, and František Kratochvíl. n.d. “Alor Malay: A Grammar Sketch.” Leiden University/Palacký University Olomouc.

Blom, Elma, Aylin C. Küntay, Marielle Messer, Josje Verhagen, and Paul Leseman. 2014. “The Benefits of Being Bilingual: Working Memory in Bilingual Turkish–Dutch

Children.” *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 128: 105–19. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2014.06.007.
Collins, James T. 1982. “Linguistic Research in Maluku.” *Oceanic Linguistics* 21: 73–146.
Crystal, David. 2000. *Language Death.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Engelenhoven, Aone. 1995. *A Description of the Leti Language*. PhD thesis Leiden University.
Engelenhoven, Aone, and John Hajek. 2000. “East Timor and the Southwest Moluccas: Language, Time and Connections.” *Studies in Languages and Cultures of East Timor* 3: 107–24.
Hammarström, Harald, Sebastian Bank, Robert Forkel, and Martin Haspelmath, eds. 2018. *Glottolog 3.2*. Jena: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. http://glottolog.org/.
Kaiping, Gereon, and Marian Klamer, eds. 2017. “LexiRumah – A Lexical Database of Lesser Sunda Languages.” Leiden: Leiden University Centre for Linguistics. http://www.model-ling.eu/lexirumah/.
Klamer, Marian. 1998. *A Grammar of Kambera*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
———. 2010. *A Grammar of Teiwa*. Vol. 49. Mouton Grammar Library. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
———. 2011. *A Short Grammar of Alorese (Austronesian)*. Languages of the World/Materials 486. Munich: Lincom GmbH.
———. 2014. “Kaera.” In *The Papuan Languages of Timor, Alor and Pantar: Sketch Grammars*, edited by Antoinette Schapper. Vol. 1. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
———. 2018. “Breathiness Is Not Phonemic in Kedang.” *Manuscript, under Review*.
Krauss, Michael E. 1992. “The World’s Languages in Crisis.” *Language* 68: 4–10.
Raymond, Joan. 1998. “Say What? Preserving Endangered Languages.” *Newsweek 14 Sept 1998*, 1998.
Simons, Gary F., and Charles D. Fennig, eds. 2018. “Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Twentieth Edition.” Dallas, Texas: SIL International. http://www.ethnologue.com.
Tryon, Darrell T. 1995. “The Austronesian Languages.” In *Comparative Austronesian Dictionary*, edited by Darrell T. Tryon, 5–44. Mouton de Gruyter.

Contact details: m.a.f.klamer@hum.leidenuniv.nl;

www.marianklamer.org