

# Language Attitudes, Activism and Activities in Allang, Central Maluku

Michael Ewing

University of Melbourne

This paper discusses language activism and concomitant language maintenance initiatives which are developing at the grass-roots level in Maluku, taking Allang village as a representative example. Heightened awareness of the endangered status of regional languages has arisen as part of the re-engagement with locally defined identities which has emerged following the recent civil unrest (*kerusuhan*) in Maluku (1998-2002). Allang is a Christian village on the west coast of Ambon Island where a long process of language shift to Ambonese Malay has meant that the local indigenous language is now only spoken by a handful of people in their 70s. Until recently, there was little emphasis placed on maintenance of the indigenous language. During the reconciliation period which has followed the end of the civil unrest, a shift in attitude toward the Allang language vis-à-vis Ambonese Malay and Indonesian has seen the rise of a new emphasis on local community involvement in language maintenance activities.

In December 2003 a conference on language and culture was organized in Allang, which brought together village experts in local traditions with representatives of the Allang diaspora from Ambon City, Jakarta and the Netherlands. Programs begun at this time or implemented since have included the production of word lists, informal teaching of Allang as a subject in school, and the writing and performance of songs in the local language. Some of the early initiatives, controlled by interests from outside the village, did not move beyond first-stage development. The past year has now seen an increase in the more practical implementation of language maintenance activities started at the village level itself. The recently formed Allang Cultural Association has proposed a village-wide initiative to develop teaching materials and set up language clubs that bring older speakers together with younger learners.

Similar language maintenance activities are occurring in other villages in Maluku. In addition, cooperative projects have been planned involving members of different village communities working together and which are also drawing in participation from academic professionals in Maluku. Such initiatives are both beneficial to local communities in isolation, and also contribute to a wider network of cultural maintenance practice and to the ongoing processes of reconciliation throughout Maluku.