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REVIEW


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Mai Ite Lepa Alune ["Let’s speak Alune"] is a collection of some two hundred brief conversations in the Alune language, spoken in approximately 26 villages in western Seram, Central Maluku. The book has arisen largely through research undertaken by Yushin and Takako Taguchi, working for the Summer Institute of Linguistics of Maluku, and their Indonesian counterparts from Pattimura University.

The volume is most usefully considered as a potential contribution to the maintenance of the Alune language. It has been well established that the majority of languages spoken in Christian villages in Central Maluku are endangered (cf. Collins 1982, Florey 1990, 1991, 1993). Language shift to Ambonese Malay and Indonesian is occurring in Alune villages, including including Kamal, Nurue, and Lohiatata, which relocated to the south coast of Seram during the RMS conflict in the 1950s. The process is reflected in intergenerational syntactic and phonological changes together with extensive code-switching and the use of Malay loanwords. Language shift is proceeding more rapidly toward language obsolescence in villages that relocated to the north coast early in this century, such as Mumaten and Nikulukan, and have therefore been subjected to a much longer period of frequent contact with speakers of other languages. Community members under thirty years of age in these villages exhibit a marked reluctance and/or inability to speak (and, in many cases, to comprehend) Alune.

Although the Alune language is still in daily use in villages in the interior of west Seram, recent research indicates that the process of language
shift has commenced (cf. Florey 1992). While the language is still transmitted to some children, other ones reveal a reduced ability to communicate in Alune. The range of Alune speech styles is also contracting, and knowledge of Alune folktales and song styles, as well as specialized terminology associated with avoidance and ritual languages, is limited to a few older speakers. This process is likely to accelerate as economic and social changes result in community members spending more time away from their villages for the purposes of education, employment, and trade.

Studies of endangered languages in other parts of the world have shown that it is extremely difficult to reverse or arrest the process of language shift leading to language obsolescence (Dorian 1989, Schmidt 1990). While the ability to do so stems primarily from the desire of the speech community itself, the success of language renewal and language maintenance programs is closely associated with cultural awareness as well as the acceptance and support by the wider community of the socio-political rights of minority groups. A common goal of language maintenance or renewal programs is to raise speakers' self-esteem through the reversal of negative attitudes toward the minority language and culture (cf. Wurm 1991). Aboriginal language maintenance programs established in Australia have shown that the production of attractive, well-produced written materials in the endangered language is an important step towards achieving this aim (Hudson and McConvell 1984).

The goals of Mai Ite Lepa Alune, as stated by the authors in its preface, are: (1) to promote an interest in reading Alune or Indonesian among Alune people, and hence to raise the prestige of Alune to equal that enjoyed by Indonesian; (2) to assist Alune people in learning to read and write the national language, Indonesian; (3) to assist government officials located in or near Alune villages in learning to speak Alune, and hence to promote better communication; and (4) to encourage Alune people to learn English. In order to promote these goals, the book is trilingual in its presentation, with approximate Indonesian and English translations for the Alune conversations. The book also includes pronunciation keys for Alune and English, and a brief grammar of Alune.

The authors have chosen to write Mai Ite Lepa Alune in the North dialect of Alune. This decision was made for pragmatic reasons because the North dialect is spoken in the majority of Alune villages, including Buria, Hukuanakota, Hakukucil, Kamal, Kawa, Laiuwon, Laturake, Lumoli, Murikau, Murnaten, Nikulukan, Niniari, Nuru, Patahue, Riring, Rumasol, Uwet, Wakolo, and Watui (Collins 1983:40). (The North dialect group incorporates the “Central West,” “Central East,” and “North Coastal” dialect groups identified by Taguchi [1989] on the basis of lexicostatistics. Unfortunately, Taguchi provides no linguistic evidence for his classification.) Five of the remaining Alune villages, Lohiasapalewa, Lohiatata, Manusa, Rambatu, and Rumberu, speak the Central dialect (which Taguchi [1989:34] calls the “South” dialect), although Lohiasapalewa is shifting to the North dialect. There are very few remaining speakers of the South dialect, which traditionally was spoken in Kairatu (Collins 1983:40) (and which Taguchi calls the “Kairatu” dialect).

The authors point out that the North dialect is “well understood by all the other dialect speakers according to the dialect survey which was done February 1988” (p. vii). While this is undoubtedly true, such an explanation fails to take into account the positive attitude that speakers of the Central dialect retain towards their dialect. Speakers in these villages remain proud of their dialect and of their historically close relationship with speakers in other villages within the Central dialect area. Villagers in Lohiatata and Lohiasapalewa were outspoken in their view that the North dialect is not “their language,” and expressed a wish to see written material produced in the Central dialect (pers. comm.).

A partial solution to this issue would be the incorporation of a short explanation of the principal phonological differences between dialects in the preface to the book. The most salient difference is the retention of *k in the North dialect and the shift to ? (glottal stop) in the Central dialect, as in nikwele ~ nitiwele ‘coconut’, kane ~ ?ane ‘to eat’. Other regular phonological differences between the Central and North dialects include ml ~ nd, as in mlinu ~ ndi ‘garden, farm’; and d ~ r, as in dani ~ rani ‘to cry’. (In the Central dialect, [d] occurs word-initially and [r] occurs elsewhere.) A brief description of these differences would acknowledge the existence of other dialects and provide useful information to potential language learners who may be planning to work in villages in the Central dialect area.

The dialogues in Mai Ite Lepa Alune have been organized into thirteen sections according to topics such as daily life, flora and fauna, work, sickness, and the family. This style is very similar to an Alune language-learning book produced early this century by a Dutch military officer (Sierevelt 1919), who based his conversations on the topics of house-building, times of the day and night, on patrol, at the doctor, and the
human body. A major difference between the two books is the absence in Mai Ite Lepa Alune of a short glossary at the end of each dialogue to assist readers both in learning lexical items and in understanding the syntactic structure of Alune. The Indonesian and English translations are insufficient for these purposes since, as the authors state, they are "a natural rendering of equivalent meanings" (p. ix) and not a literal translation of the Alune conversations. However, difficulties for readers and language learners arise as a result of this format. For example, in dialogue 72 (p. 62), the Alune sentence Yake le ale sike tekwa mo eleki lakwai is given the English translation "Don't do that because you are not very skilled yet and you will cut your finger." A translation that more closely reflects the Alune would be "Don't do that because you don't know how to peel (fruit or vegetables) and will wound yourself." The translation misleads readers and language learners into assuming that the Alune sentence contains the lexical items for 'finger' and 'to cut', and also makes no mention of the verb 'to peel'. A simple glossary would rectify this problem and allow the current translations to be retained.

Mai Ite Lepa Alune is also marred by the constant and unnecessary use of Indonesian lexical items. To cite just three examples from the many instances, in dialogue 162 (p. 146), Indonesian hari 'day' is used in place of the Alune petu; in dialogue 166 (p. 150), the Indonesian first person singular pronoun saya is used in place of the Alune au; in dialogue 18 (p. 16), the Indonesian loan ename (enam 'six' modified to conform to Alune phonological rules) is used in place of the Alune ne. The authors also frequently refer to the Alune language with the Indonesian bahasa 'language'. Alune speakers however, refer to their language as somtoline (< sou 'speech', -m- conjoiner, toli 'true, straight'), the 'true language'. The unnecessary mixing of Indonesian with Alune detracts from the authors' stated goal of supporting the maintenance of Alune.

Difficulties for readers in understanding Alune syntax arise from the lack of an adequate syntactic description, inconsistent usage throughout the book, and the absence of either a glossary or morpheme-by-morpheme glosses of the dialogues. This issue is exemplified through an examination of the authors' use of genitive marking. In the brief grammatical description appended to the dialogues (pp. 185–199), the authors list the affixed genitive markers without describing the critical difference between alienable and inalienable possession. There is also no description or explanation of the phonological processes that arise through affixation and con-
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Turbulent Times is aptly named, focusing on the most colorful characters and dramatic moments in the centuries-long story of struggle over control of the spice trade in North Maluku. Admirers of Hanna's Indonesian Banda (1978) will recognize, in this collaboration with Des Alwi, Hanna's dramatic evocation of Maluku history and his critical assessment of the power struggles that accompanied Europe's violent entrance into the spice trade. When I found the book in the Rumah Budaya Banda Naira Museum in January 1991 (when it was just off the presses), I was taking a vacation from a study of Tidorean oral history traditions. Since these traditions offer few details on the actual personalities and goings-on of each successive regime (often little more than a list of the names of rulers), this book's more descriptive accounts were especially welcome.

Indeed, each chapter can be read as a self-contained tale in a series of power struggles, accompanied by judicious sifting through the rumors that accompanied them. As in a good mystery novel, we are even treated to creative accounts of the possible motivations of the main actors in these dramas, and to the flaws of character that almost inevitably bring about their ruin. This is reflected in such chapter titles as "The Freakish Regime of Good Governor Galvao," "The Peregrinations and Perils of Hairun," "Francis Drake's Curious Visit," "Baab's Mysterious Death," "The Despicable Sultan Madarsjah," "The Abominable Admiral de Vlaming," and "M. Pierre Poivre and the Purloined Spice Trees." This gives you a flavor of the sometimes quaint but appealing style that the authors may have retained from their reading of early source materials. (The captions to the twenty photographs included in the text also have a whimsical feel to them.) Another chapter title, "Moluccan Peccadillos, Iberian Fiascos," sums up the authors' generally cynical assessment of the self-interest and greed of all parties to these processes. At times the reader's head spins at the ultimately almost comic repetition of disasters that befell successive...