Research Note

The Socio-Historical Background of the Adoption of
Hangul in Vernacular Education in Indonesia

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Abstract: This article aims to investigate the meanings and social backgrounds of a unique vernacular education project that started in 2009 in a small village located on Buton Island in eastern Indonesia. In this project, the local dialect, called Cia-Cia, is taught in some elementary schools while Korean Hangul is adopted to transcribe the dialect. Some linguists have asserted that Hangul is phonetically less appropriate than the Roman alphabet for transcribing Cia-Cia. In addition to an overview of these linguistic discussions, this article will consider the project from multiple socio-historical perspectives and discuss the historical rivalry among the different ethnic societies in the region, the language education system and local identity politics in present-day Indonesia under decentralization, and the “globalization of Hangul” movement in Korea.

Key words: Cia-Cia, Hangul, Buton, Indonesia, decentralization, vernacular education

This article attempts to provide a rare and vivid case study of the process by which a small-scale society adopted a foreign script and of how the socio-political dynamics worked in this process.

A unique vernacular education project started in 2009 in a small village in Baubau City, located on Buton Island in eastern Indonesia. A local dialect called Cia-Cia is being taught at a number of elementary schools, while Hangul, the Korean script, has been adopted to transcribe the dialect. The phenomenon has attracted the interest of world-wide media, but it has also led to academic debates, especially in the field of linguistics. Some linguists argue that Hangul is less appropriate than the Roman alphabet for transcribing Cia-Cia (e.g. Cho 2011; Um 2013).

Historically, the kingdoms and regional societies that existed in the area of present-day Indonesia adopted Indian and Arabic scripts to write their own languages. At the beginning of the 20th century, they accepted the Roman alphabet for transcribing the national Indonesian language, bahasa Indonesia. The successive adoption of these scripts was the result of historical relationships in trade, religious networks, immigration, and

colonization throughout these regions (Aoyama 2002:11-23; Song n.d.; Tônaga 2002:34-35). From this perspective, the oddity of this contemporary combination of the Cia-Cia language and Hangul stands out because the two regions, Baubau and Korea, had no direct contact prior to this time. Therefore, in addition to an overview of linguistic discussions, based on ethnographic field research and text analysis, this article will consider the project from multiple socio-historical perspectives and discuss the historical rivalry among the different ethnic societies in the region, the language education system in present-day Indonesia under decentralization, and the “globalization of Hangul” movement in Korea.

**Outline of Baubau, Cia-Cia, and the Linguistic Situation in Indonesia**

Buton Island which has a population of about 400,000, is located in the southeast off the coast of Sulawesi Island, and falls under Southeast Sulawesi (Sulawesi Tenggara) Province’s administration. Baubau, an autonomous city district, is on the southwest coast of the island and was the former capital of the Buton Kingdom which was founded in the 1300s and after the Islamization in the mid-16th century lasted as a sultanate until 1960. During the so-called “Age of Discovery” from the 15th to the 17th centuries, the Buton Sultanate gained revenue as a transit port in the maritime trade route to the Maluku Islands, alias “Spice Islands.”

Buton Island harbors multiple sub-ethnic groups. The people dwelling in the area of the ex-sultanate of Buton are generally called Butonese, among whom the Wolio and Cia-Cia are the two most dominant groups. The Wolio nobility, with a population of about 65,000 (Ethnologue 2014) are distinguished from the other sub-ethnic groups through their use of the Wolionese language. The majority of the important social and political offices in the region are occupied by Wolionese. Until recently, the once small but relatively prosperous hub of the spice trade at the time of Buton Sultanate was reduced to a remote, poor, and unknown city to most Indonesians. As will be examined below, the Wolionese political elite are not satisfied with the social marginality and anonymity of present-day Buton society. It is their strong desire to regain past glory that motivates them to adopt Hangul.

The Cia-Cia language, the subject of this article, is linguistically classified in the Muna-Buton Group of Indonesian languages, a Malayo-Polynesian sub-group of the Austronesian language family. The population of the Cia-Cia group is about 79,000 (Ethnologue 2014), and about 20,000 reside in the outskirts of Baubau. The Cia-Cia people are the commoners in the traditional social hierarchy, and in the time of the Buton Sultanate, commoners’ villages had a tributary relationship to the royal palace at the Wolio fortress. Today the Cia-Cia people’s main occupation is agriculture. In everyday life, they have limited contact

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1 This article investigates the Hangul adoption project from a wider perspective than in my earlier work (Yamaguchi 2011:353-354).
with the Wolio people, therefore their customary practices are very different from those of the Wolio.

Indonesia is multi-linguistic: there are more than 500 local languages, only 14 of which have more than one million speakers (Moriyama 2009:8). In the independence period in the early 20th century, bahasa Indonesia was one of the most important symbols of nationalism as it was part of the national motto of “one homeland, one nation, and one language” in the “Youth Pledge” (Sumpah Pemuda) declared in 1928 at Batavia, present-day Jakarta. Under the regime of President Soeharto (1968-1998), national integration and economic development were the most important goals, and bahasa Indonesia was one of the most effective tools in achieving these, especially the former. The central government promoted language education in the compulsory education curriculum in order to disseminate bahasa Indonesia throughout the country. As a result, many Indonesians are bilingual in Indonesian and their respective local tongues. This is also the case with the Cia·Cia speakers on Buton Island: they can use both Cia·Cia and bahasa Indonesia without any difficulty in their daily life.

The Hangul Project from Inception to Decline of the Boom

The inception of the Hangul project was an incidental encounter between two key figures, the mayor of Baubau and a linguistic specialist from Korea who participated in the 9th international symposium on manuscripts held in Baubau 5-8 August, under the auspices of the Society of Manuscripts in the Indonesian Archipelago (Yamaguchi 2011:353; Yokoi 2012:12). This was the first international event in Baubau, and more than thirty foreign scholars from more than ten countries including the author attended. Among the attendees was Professor Chun, a Malay language specialist from Korea. During the symposium, Chun made an excursion to a village named Karya Baru. He made a joke to the then Mayor of Baubau, A. Tamim, who is Wolionese, that a local language that Chun happened to hear was similar to Korean in sound. Tamim explained that it was the Cia·Cia language, which was on the verge of extinction partly because it did not have phonetic characters (Song n.d.:4). Chun suggested that Hangul might be suitable for transcribing the Cia·Cia language.

As will be seen later, Chun took office in 2008 as the deputy chair of the Hummin Jeongeum Society (HJ Society, 部民正音学会), which is an organization founded in 2007 in Seoul that aims to introduce Hangul to non-literate languages. It is thus inferred that Chun was already greatly interested in globalizing Hangul at the time of his visit to Baubau in 2005.

Having received the suggestion from Chun, Mayor Tamim was inspired and encouraged to develop a project to introduce Hangul for Cia·Cia language transcription (Yamaguchi 2011:353; Song n.d.:4). The interest of both the HJ Society and Tamim started to take shape later in 2008. Some delegates from the HJ Society went to Baubau from Seoul to
sign with Mayor Tamim a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the introduction of Hangul. Based on this MOU, Ariffin (pseudonym), a high school English teacher in Karya Baru from the Cia-Cia-speaking sub-ethnic group, was invited to Seoul by the HJ Society to be trained as a Hangul teacher, and the members of the HJ Society began to develop a Hangul transcription system for the Cia-Cia language and to make teaching materials.

The historical linguistic situation in Buton Island is such that in the time of the Buton Sultanate, the royal court designated Wolionese as the official language of the Sultanate. After the establishment of Indonesian Republic in 1950, the language situation in Buton did not change significantly; in the era of President Soeharto, the prevalence of Wolionese in the area became decisive since it had been taught at all elementary schools in Baubau in the officially promoted “local contents education program,” which will be mentioned later, regardless of what local languages the children used (Yamaguchi 2011:254-255). In the post-Soeharto era, a decentralization policy was initiated in 2001, under which the regional government has gained autonomy with regard to education, culture, and other areas. Under these conditions, however, the status of Wolionese as the dominant language has remained, and the local government did not take any action in the field of local contents education until 2009.

In July 2009, the Cia-Cia language began to be taught to children of the 4th grade level and above at three elementary schools in Karya Baru village. From the beginning, Ariffin, the English teacher mentioned above, has been in charge of almost all the Cia-Cia classes in the area. The news of the adoption of Hangul in a small village in Indonesia was reported not only by newspapers in both Indonesia and Korea, but also carried by some major newspapers with headlines such as “To Save Its Dying Tongue, Indonesian Isle Orders Out for Korean” (Wall Street Journal 2009); “South Korea’s Latest Export: Its Alphabet” (New York Times 2009); “Sustaining the Local Dialect with Hangul” (Asahi Shimbun 2010). The name of Baubau became famous in a moment.

At about the same time, Mayor Tamim started to carry out cultural exchange events between high school and university students in Baubau and Seoul. In order to support the Hangul education project and to promote friendly relations between the two cities, Seoul has sent Korean teachers and donated 300 personal computers to Baubau. In addition to the mayor of Seoul, Tamim also contacted other Korean officials and succeeded in winning their cultural cooperation and financial assistance (Yokoi 2012:32:33).

In Baubau, Tamim ordered street and school signs to be written in both the Roman alphabet and Hangul (See Figure 1).
Every time government officials or other VIPs came from outside Baubau, Tamim took them to Karya Baru village and proudly showed off the signs written in the two different writing systems in order to let them know that “Baubau is an international city.”

In November 2013, Tamim’s term as mayor expired and a new mayor named Tamrin took office. This new mayor, who like Tamim is Wolionese, does not seem overly eager to work with the HJ Society or Seoul, and he has conducted cultural exchange events less frequently than did his predecessor. By this time, Professor Chun, ex-deputy Chair of the HJ Society and one of the key figures in this project, had left the society because of internal strife.

As of 2012, the total number of school children who had studied the Cia·Cia language in Hangul was estimated to be 295 (Yokoi 2012:14), corresponding to merely 0.37% of the Cia·Cia-speaking population. Therefore, most of the residents in Karya Baru village cannot read the Hangul on the street and school signs in their village.

When I interviewed Ariflin at his high school in September 2013, he said that initially many students seemed to find it a little difficult to write the Cia·Cia language in Hangul because it had never been written in any script before. After taking lessons, however, they could write their own names or some easy Cia·Cia terms in Hangul and most of the students were enjoying learning. He added that the Hangul project had effects of provoking interest in foreign affairs and of widening the way of thinking of the school children. Since the beginning, however, Ariflin has taken charge of almost all Hangul lessons without any appropriate reward. As a result, he seemed tired of teaching Hangul,
and sometimes he has even cancelled Hangul lessons because of his heavy workload. As of 2013, the boom in learning Hangul seemed to be almost over in the author's eyes.

**Background and Key Figures (1): Ambition for the Globalization of Hangul**

According to my research, the aims and socio-political backgrounds of the project are twofold, consisting of the ambitions of the HJ society and of the mayor of Baubau.

Hangul is said to have originated in 1443 with Sejong (世宗), the 4th emperor of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), as he desired to correctly transcribe the Korean language. As the name “Hangul” (Hangul), which means “the Great Character,” shows, there is a shared belief in Korean society that it is a systematic and scientific script and its characters are appropriate for transcribing all the phonemes of languages around the world (Higuchi 2006). Thus the introduction of Hangul to non-literate languages has long been encouraged (Higuchi 2006:21; Yokoi 2012:22). Since the 1990s, academic concern about globalizing Hangul and developing original phonetic characters based on Hangul has intensified (Yokoi 2012:22-23).

Within this tide of the globalization of Hangul and with the rise of international arguments to save endangered languages, the HJ Society was founded by Korean linguists and others in Seoul (Yokoi 2012:24; HJ Society 2014). This ambition to globalize Hangul is central to an understanding of the Korean ambitions in the introduction of Hangul to the Cia-Cia-speaking people in Baubau.

**Background and Key Figures (2): The Political Ambition of the Mayor of Baubau**

The one critical factor that enabled Baubau to proceed with the Hangul project was the implementation of the Indonesian regional autonomy policy in 2001, soon after the post-Soeharto era began. Specifically because Baubau was promoted to being an autonomous city district after secession from the former Buton District in 2001, government officials of Baubau, especially Mayor Tamim, have not merely aimed to develop the region but to establish a new province, Buton Raya (The Great Buton). At the very core of Baubau’s adoption of Hangul were the vigorous intentions of Tamim and his officials on the one hand to obtain economic advantages as they drew economic assistance from Seoul, and on

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2 According to the articles in Korean newspapers clipped by Hiroshi Yokoi (2012:29-39), until around 2010 Baubau had received benefits in such forms as school supplies, dispatch of Korean teachers to Baubau, and so on, from the Korean side. Seoul even had promised the establishment of “a Hangul culture center” in Baubau. In 2011, however, according to an online news article, the HJ Society declared that the Hangul project had failed because of the Korean government’s non-fulfillment of the contract of financial aid for Baubau (Searchina 2011). It may therefore be inferred that one of the crucial reasons for the decline of the Hangul project was the disappointment among the Baubau officials with the unsatisfactory aid from Korea.

3 Even an organization named “Literacy movement council of the global village in Hangul” was founded with the aim of disseminating Hangul (Yokoi 2012:22-23).
the other hand to accomplish their local political ambitions, as they declared that Baubau has the social potential to become the capital of the planned new province.

In order to better understand the ambitions stated above, it is necessary to examine the history of the Buton region, a history of marginalization. The process is long-term and multilayered. Firstly, in the time of the sultanate, especially in the 17th century, in order to outdo rival kingdoms and to keep its independence, Buton collaborated with the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which later nationalists have often considered a national enemy in Indonesian history. Secondly, in the course of Buton's integration into the Republic of Indonesia, a new province was planned to be established in the 1960s, the boundaries of which were supposed to be delineated according to the area of the Buton Sultanate. The then officials of the sultanate expected that the capital would be located at Baubau as a matter of course. The plan, however, was not realized (Yamaguchi 2011:274-278). Furthermore, in the newly-established Sulawesi Tenggara Province, Baubau had to yield its central position to Kendari, a small city located on the southeast part of Sulawesi Island which had never been economically or culturally superior to or more developed than Baubau, (Yamaguchi 2011:277-278).

A more fundamental reason for the backwardness of Buton in the structure of the Republic was related to the allegation that this region was the stronghold of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). After the purge of alleged communists at the end of the 1960s, the Butonese were forced to suffer long-term oppression. Many Butonese were dismissed from their jobs and important administrative positions were dominated by Soeharto's military men (Yamaguchi 2011:278-281). The Butonese believed that these military men, particularly those from Makassar, intentionally stifled the development of Buton because of the historical resentment regarding its earlier subjugation of Makassar (Yamaguchi 2011:281-282; Song n.d.:11). Today, Butonese elites hope to dispel such historical stigmas by encouraging economic development in the region.

In conclusion, behind the adoption of Hangul in Baubau are the combined interests both of the HJ Society, which wants to globalize Hangul, and of Baubau, which wants to regain its past glory through modern regional development.

Significance and Problems of the Hangul Project from a Linguistic Point of View

Some Korean linguists have pointed out both the advantage and disadvantage of transcribing Cia-Cia in Hangul (e.g., Cho 2011: Um 2013). The Cia-Cia language, for example, has implosive /b/ and /d/ sounds, while Indonesian does not. Incidentally, the Wolio language also has the same sounds, and if these are transcribed in the Roman alphabet, they become /bh/ and /dh/ or merely /b/ and /d/. By contrast, Hangul has corresponding transcriptions as /￨/ and /✈/, and Cia-Cia words that contain sounds
such as /bæel/ or /hæel/, which means “rice,” can correctly be transcribed as /-going l/, or words such as /dadi/ or /dhadhi/, which means “life,” as /-ra/ (Um 2013:139-142).

There are, however, limitations in transcribing every sound of Cia-Cia in Hangul. For example, Hangul does not clearly distinguish between /l/ and /l/ sounds, while Cia-Cia does. Accordingly, a linguistic specialist from the HJ society suggested the utilization of /eul/, a defunct letter in the Hangul alphabet, to transcribe /l/, while using the letter /æl/ to only represent the sound /l/. The utilization of /eul/, though, caused a further problem because current computer keyboards do not provide this letter. Accordingly, as a temporary solution, /l/ is being transcribed in Hangul as /æl/ with the addition of the script /eul/, which can be transcribed in Roman as /eul/. As a result, /lima/ which means “five,” for example, is transcribed in Hangul as /æl-ri-ma/, which can be transcribed in Roman as /eul li ma/ (Song n.d.:6; Um 2013:140-142). A Korean language specialist, Eui-sung Cho, has pointed out that such a character as /-eul/ is redundant (2011:30-31). Based on comprehensive considerations, Cho concluded that the Hangul writing system invented by the HJ Society is based more on the present orthographic system of the Korean language than on the sound system of the Cia-Cia language. Hangul is, therefore, less appropriate than the Roman alphabet for transcribing Cia-Cia language (Cho 2011:33; Yamaguchi 2011:354).

**From the View of Indonesia’s Regional Society under the Decentralization Policy**

An interesting aspect of the Hangul adoption project is that the promoters of the project have been the mayor and his government officials, most of whom are Wolionese, while the Cia-Cia people have been passive recipients (Song n.d.:20). For the local elites, it was crucial to integrate the local village societies scattered around Buton Island under the centripetal power of Baubau in order to encourage a consensus toward the establishment of the new province. In this sense, the Hangul project looked promising for the local government due to the possibility of integrating Cia-Cia speaking people into the margins of regional political boundaries, while the project also looked somewhat beneficial to the villagers in terms of their own development.

It has often been observed in many regional societies in Indonesia that in the era of decentralization the “anak daerah” (local child/person), the majority of whom consist of groups higher in the local traditional hierarchy, are given priority over delegates from Java and Jakarta in being appointed as higher officials in the regional political system. As a result, traditional hierarchy systems are directly reflected in the present political and social structure in many regional societies (Yamaguchi 2011:281). As is the case in Baubau, the Hangul project will definitely consolidate the leadership and centripetal force of the Wolionese as the rulers of the Baubau region.
In this regard, the adoption of Hangul can be understood in the context of decentralization in the post-Soeharto era as the regional elites in Baubau seek to establish transnational networks with Korea by adopting its writing system. It is thus a very unique form of the regional identity movements occurring in various guises throughout Indonesia under the tide of decentralization and democratization⁴.

**Remaining Questions: How Could It Be Significant?**

If Hangul adoption in Baubau is merely a product of an accidental match of political interests on both sides, of Baubau and the HJ Society, and if the appropriateness of the project is not even guaranteed linguistically, how is it significant?

From a diplomatic perspective, there have been many problems with the Hangul project. When the news of the Cia-Cia adoption of Hangul was released, the Indonesian government was reluctant to agree to or support it. Indeed, the Indonesian ambassador to Korea questioned the necessity of the utilization of Hangul since Cia-Cia-speaking people could have used the Roman alphabet to transcribe the Indonesian language. He also added that this adoption of Hangul could arouse ethnic jealousy among other nearby ethnic groups if Korea's exclusive support for the Cia-Cia-speaking region increases (New York Times 2009), and he was anxious as to whether the use of Hangul might linguistically isolate Cia-Cia speakers because nobody can read Hangul outside the small Cia-Cia community (Korea Times 2010).

This concern was shared by the Korean Government, which was also reluctant to fully support the project, because it was afraid that its unofficial support of a small city might damage official diplomatic relations with Indonesia. As an official from the Korean Government stated, “This is diplomatically sensitive” (The New York Times 2009).

Could the project then give us any insight into present-day Indonesian socio-political conditions? As mentioned above, the introduction of Hangul was conducted under the framework of the “local contents program.” The program was started in 1994 for the ostensible purposes of preserving local cultures and developing regional and human resources. The program, however, has had a negative function in that it has denied and marginalized some ethnic minorities’ languages, histories, and cultures which were not selected as subjects of the curriculum (Nakaya 1997:113). In Baubau, Wolionese until recently continued to be chosen and taught uniformly at schools, even after the collapse of the Soeharto regime in 1998. In this regard, promoting Cia-Cia instead of Wolionese language education seems at first glance to be a remarkable attempt by the Baubau

⁴The adoption of Hangul, however, may not always be regarded as a local reaction against Soeharto’s New Order centralism, which was resented by most of the outer islanders as it only benefitted Jakarta and Java. As is the case with many regional societies in post-Soeharto Indonesia, it is important for Baubau to sustain a good relationship with the central government, particularly in light of its continuing financial dependence. Thus, “behind the fervor of local identity movements lay not a desire to secede but rather to outdo rivals in loyalty to Jakarta, which was still the source of cash” (Schulte Nordholt and van Klinken 2007:20).
government after having long been indifferent to the neglected languages in the region. As outlined above, however, the initiation of Cia-Cia language education was realized as a result of the match of political interests between Baubau and the Korean side, not as a result of considerations of the multilingual situation or a desire to respect minority languages; it was not even a result of the Cia-Cia-speaking people’s needs or demands, as will be seen later.

Now let us consider the process of adopting new characters from a somewhat wider view. In an article on Indian-derived scripts in insular Southeast Asia, Toru Aoyama (2002) pointed out that there are background factors that influence whether or not a society accepts a new script or switches from one script to another. These factors include the external influences on the society, linguistic features, and the modes of script use in the society concerned. In the case of the Hangul project in Baubau, as for the former two factors, the matching ambitions of the HJ Society and Baubau on the one hand, and on the other hand the relatively simple phonetic system of the Cia-Cia language that reasonably if not completely suited transcription in Hangul, together promoted the introduction of Hangul. In terms of the third factor, Aoyama (2002:19-20) hypothesized two modes of script usage: “the flow type” and “the stock type.” In societies that show features of the flow type, such as the Hanunoo-Mangyan people in the Philippines, the usage of characters is limited to temporarily recording only a small part of the linguistic information. In societies where the stock type is dominant, such as in Java in Indonesia, the characters are used institutionally for recording, archiving, and reusing every word for a long duration of time. It is not possible, however, to fixedly or exclusively classify every society into one of the two types, since the mode of the usage of scripts, even in literate societies, can be varied and is historically determined by various social conditions (Aoyama 2002:19-20). As for the Cia-Cia-speaking people, there is no obvious evidence of their longing for a writing system for the Cia-Cia language. It is necessary to carefully observe what modes of usage will become more conspicuous in the future and whether or not the Hangul project will play any role in the determination of that mode.

**Conclusion**

The adoption of Hangul for Cia-Cia language education was realized as a result of the match of the interests between the HJ Society, which wants to globalize Hangul, and Wolionese officials in Baubau, who want Baubau to regain its central position through modern regional development. In the background of Wolionese intentions, there is further intertwined a history of the marginalization of Buton society from the time of the sultanate to date. Efforts to achieve the Wolionese’ political intentions were facilitated and accelerated by the implementation of the decentralization policy in the post-Soeharto era.

The Hangul project did not originate in the desire among Baubau officials to respect minority languages in the region; nor was it a result of Cia-Cia-speaking people’s demands.
Throughout the project, more benefit accrued to Wolionese than to Cia-Cia-speaking people, and the social structuring of Buton society that primarily accords social superiority to Wolionese has not changed.

This case shows us how fast the process of the adoption of foreign scripts can proceed, and how social and political dynamics can operate artificially in this process. The project has become less active since a new local administration began under a new mayor in 2013, and no one can confidently predict who can sustain the project responsibly for the future. Since the project is now facing a critical turning point, it should continue to be observed carefully.

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