

***Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and Bahasa Daerah: Challenges in the Present and Future**

***Mytha Candria*^{1*}, *Dwi Wulandari*¹**

¹English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia

Abstract. The reason underlying the writing of this paper concerns the policies of Indonesian government that favoured unity over diversity, which impacted, among others, the number of local languages in Indonesia. Because of the previous government policies, Indonesia is currently facing a challenging situation, in which more than 400 of its local languages are endangered and extinct. The policies were against the spirits of Indonesian official motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which values both unity and diversity. This means that *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* acknowledges the centrality of both the national language and local languages. Thus, both languages need to be preserved and supported if Indonesians are to actualize the spirits of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, meaning *unity in diversity* and *diversity in unity*.

¹ Corresponding author: mythacandria@live.undip.ac.id

1 Introduction

There are two reasons we have been interested in writing this paper. The first one concerns the policies of the governments of Indonesia who valued unity over diversity and did not consider cultural diversity as a national asset needed to preserve [1-3]. This attitude has opposed the spirit of the national official motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which declares the significance of both *unity* and *diversity*.

The second reason relates to the fact that the number of indigenous or local languages '*bahasa daerah*' in Indonesia is continually decreasing [3-5]. The shrinking of *bahasa daerah* is indeed unfortunate for the country and nation, which is well-known to have had various local languages. Indonesia hosts "over 1,300 communities speaking more than 700 languages, located across at least 17,500 islands, making the nation one of the premier sources of cultural and linguistic diversity in the world" [Badan Pusat Statistik, 2010, in 3, p. 39]. However, as Musgrave [4] writes, while several languages in west Indonesia, such as Javanese and Sundanese, are "safe", a large number of the languages of eastern Indonesia are endangered. Eberhard et al. [2022 in 3] note that around 35% of local languages in Indonesia are endangered, and many of these languages are in West Papua. The most recent data published by Ethnologue [5] show that 436 Indonesia's local languages are endangered, while 14 have already been extinct. This condition is a real challenge to Indonesians, whose national motto highlights the centrality of not only unity but also diversity.

These two reasons have encouraged us to write a paper in which we argue that cultural diversity is an invaluable legacy that Indonesia and Indonesians have had for hundreds of years, and the decrease of Indonesian cultural, as well as linguistic, diversity is a real loss for the country and entire nation. To arrive at the argument, we recall the history and philosophy of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which was born of a multicultural society. Subsequently, we argue for the pivotal role *bahasa daerah* 'local or indigenous languages' play to maintain multicultural Indonesia. This is because local languages bear cultural loads such as identity, worldviews, wisdom, etc, and their death means the death of all the cultural values and norms they carry. Local languages are the vehicle for passing cultural diversity to Indonesian younger and future generations. Therefore, preserving local languages is the primary way to maintain Indonesian diverse cultures.

2 Bhinneka Tunggal Ika: History, Philosophy, and the Preservation of Local Languages

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, literally meaning unity in diversity, is the national motto of the Republic of Indonesia [6-8]. Officially and publicly declared in the 1950-s, the motto has frequently been criticised as an empty slogan, a mere rhetoric that is not fully embraced and actualized by the government and people of Indonesia [1-3]. Abdullah [1], for example, wrote that *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* had been used by former President Soeharto to suppress cultural, as well as linguistic, diversity in Indonesia in the name of national unity and oneness. Roche et al. [3] also complain that the policies of Indonesian government have always favoured unity over diversity, which threatens the existence of indigenous or local languages:

Far from supporting linguistic diversity in the region, the Indonesian government has used transmigration to support their larger project of cultural assimilation. Though Indonesia's language politics are shaped by the national ideology of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* "unity in diversity", government policies have strongly emphasized unity over diversity (Arka 2013; Coleman and Fero 2023). Forceful Indonesianization began under President Suharto in 1966, and today persists in the form of various government policies, perhaps most notably in the educational model [3, p. 39-40].

2.1 The History and Philosophy of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika is originally taken from the book of *Kakawin* (poetry) of *Sutasoma*, written by Mpu Tantular in the 14th century. The name of the book was taken by Mpu Tantular from the name of a prince who was said to be very good at literary and spiritual knowledge, so that he was considered to be the embodiment of Buddha in the world [9]. The contents of the book also show the existence of very deep mystical thoughts, manifested in the form of verses and *seloka* 'quatrain of 4 rhyming lines' in ancient Javanese, the language used by the people at that time, namely during the reign of King Hayam Wuruk, which was the golden age of the Majapahit Kingdom.

The phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, found in the fifth stanza of Canto CXXXIX in *Kakawin Sutasoma*, reads as follows:

*Rwaneka dhatu winuwus Buddha Wiswa
bhinneki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen
mangkang Jinatwa kawalan Siwatwa tunggal,*

bhinneka tunggal ika tan hana Dharmma mangrwa

(It is said that Buddha and Shiva are different substances they are indeed different, yet how is it possible to recognize their difference in a glance?

since the Truth of Jina (Buddha) and (the Truth of) Siwa is One

They are indeed different, but they are of the same kind, as there are no division in Truth)

[Soewito, 1975, in 9, p. 51]

The previous poem conveys a spirit of tolerance between followers of the two major religions at that time, namely Buddhism (Jinatwa) and Hinduism (Siwatwa). Although in many ways Buddhism and Hinduism are different; the truth of both in essence is One.

Although initially the phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* was intended to describe religious tolerance, in the end it was also intended to be the goal of tolerance in all aspects of human life. Is it not true that the cycle of human life pivots on religion, so that expanding the meaning of religious tolerance into life tolerance becomes something that cannot be avoided?

Philosophically, there are two things needed to be considered in relation to the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. The first concerns the philosophical meaning of the phrase itself. Lexically, the phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* consists of three words, namely '*Bhinneka*', '*Tunggal*' and '*Ika*'. The word '*Bhinneka*' comes from the morpheme '*Bhinna*' - '*eka*', where the element of the word '*bhinna*' means different, while '*eka*' means one [10]. Meanwhile, another analysis shows that the word consists of three linguistic units '*bhinn*'-'*a*'-'*eka*', where '*a*' indicates 'no', and '*eka*' means 'one'. In other words, *bhinneka* means 'which is not one'. The word *tunggal* means 'not just one' but 'to become one', signaling a unitary unit that cannot be separated. The last word, *ika*, is a unit of reference, meaning 'that' [11]. In summary, the phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* means 'being different in that one unity' [10].

Legally, as Turiman [12] argues, the motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, as a state asset, represents a combination of two state ideologies, namely 'federation' and 'unitary'. 'Federation' suggests a group of states that join to form a larger government or country, as is the case of the United States of America, whereas 'unitary' refers to 'undivided' or 'related to a unit'. In this context, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* should thus be understood not as an idea of 'being different but in one unity', but it should rather be interpreted

and instilled more seriously and deeply as '*diversity in unity, and unity in diversity*'.

Second, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is printed on a white ribbon made of cloth, held tightly by the national symbol *Burung Garuda* 'the Bird of *Garuda*'. The printing of the motto on a piece of cloth implies that the spirit to actualize the motto in the life of the nation should not be easily torn off, as a strong cloth-ribbon is difficult to cut or tear without using any tools. Besides, the use of cloth tape shows that there is a high degree of flexibility or elasticity in applying the motto, just like pieces of clothes that can easily be waved or turned without leaving any defects. This would surely have been very different if it had been a piece of paper that had been used to print the symbol, since paper can be torn easily, and even though paper can be bent, it will show the remains of the bent. The strong spirit is needed to actualize the teachings of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which is loaded with metaphysical philosophy, signaling potential conflicts between *diversity* and *unity* [10]. To accommodate the realization of conflicting concepts among diverse groups of people having diverse cultural backgrounds needs a strong spirit and tireless efforts. A high degree of flexibility is also highly needed to see what are those things needed to be accommodated to unite the diversities, and how those that have been united remain exhibiting Indonesia's diversity.

2.2 Bhinneka Tunggal Ika: Encouragement for Local Language Preservation

The previous section illustrates how *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* had to some extent managed to face the challenges of the past Indonesia, when the founding fathers struggled to unite peoples living in areas as vast as *Nusantara* and having cultural backgrounds as diverse as 1,300 ethnic groups. *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is thus an invaluable legacy Indonesian founding fathers have left for their successors. The motto has always been expected to be able to encourage tolerance among Indonesians, since in a country as plural and multicultural as Indonesia, unity and diversity are two sides of a coin. They are inseparable. To unite does not mean to repress, let alone diminish, diversity, and, vice versa, to diversify is not to disunite or disintegrate.

For current and future Indonesia, one challenge to *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* relates to the continually decreasing number of *bahasa daerah* 'local languages' and the progressively increasing rate of shifting from local

languages to Indonesian national language *bahasa Indonesia* or to international languages such as English [4, 5, 13-18]. Indonesia, as mentioned earlier, is home to more than 700 languages, 436 of which are, unfortunately, endangered and 14 has been extinct [5]. This figure is surely alarming and has the potent to increase if the Indonesian government and people take no steps to stop.

The death of local languages means the disappearance of their cultures, as cultural values and norms can only be passed on to younger generations through the languages they are attached to: “Languages are one of the most significant emblems of human diversity, revealing how we can perceive, relate to, and understand the world differently. Languages are vehicles of our cultures, collective memory and values. They are an essential component of our identities” [19]. In other words, the death of Indonesian local languages shrinks the variety of Indonesian cultures, which is a loss for the country and nation. In this context, one way to revive, support and sustain the spirits of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is through preserving and revitalizing local languages so that Indonesia will remain a country where unity and diversity are the norms.

To guard the spirits of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, the government of Indonesia has issued several official regulations regarding the existence, maintenance, and function of local languages. Through Article 32, Clause 2 of the 1945 Constitution (UUD 1945), the State of Indonesia declares that they value and preserve local languages as national cultural assets. The Constitution is elaborated further in, among other things, Law No. 20 of 2003, which acknowledges the function of local languages as a complement to the use of Indonesian as a medium of instruction in education. Also, in Law No. 24 of 2009, Articles 41 and 42 state that the Regional Government ‘*Pemerintah Daerah*’, in cooperation with the Central Government of Indonesia, preserve local languages and local literary work. This all suggests that Indonesian government, while considering Indonesian language as having higher position and playing a more crucial role, does not ignore the existence and role of local languages.

In addition, in response to local language loss, Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, launched a program named *Merdeka Belajar Episode 17* ‘Independent Study Episode 17’, aiming to revitalize local languages, on 22 February 2022. The Ministry targeted to revitalize 38 languages, located in 12

different provinces. In 2023, the Ministry continues the program and this time they are planning to revitalize 59 local languages. Unfortunately, thus far there has been no serious evaluation as to how effective and efficient the program has been to preserve Indonesian local languages. Yet, there is hope that the *Merdeka Belajar* program will successfully maintain the life of local languages in Indonesia.

3 Conclusion

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika is the legacy of Indonesian founding fathers that holds true for all the citizens. The motto means not only *unity in diversity* but also *diversity in unity*, which requires that all aspects of the nation life, including *bahasa Indonesia* as the national language and *bahasa daerah* ‘local languages’, live side by side in harmony. *Bahasa Indonesia* plays a pivotal role because it unites the nation and enables Indonesians, despite their different cultural backgrounds, to communicate and share. Yet, all local languages are as important, for they have made Indonesia *Indonesia* and their extinction means Indonesia’s losing its diverse nature. Therefore, it is urgent for both the government and the people of Indonesia to tirelessly preserve the local languages so as to maintain Indonesia’s diverse cultures. In this way, the spirit and teaching of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which values both unity and diversity, are maintained and celebrated.

References

1. I. Abdullah, "*Politik Bhinneka Tunggal Ika dalam Keragaman Budaya Indonesia*," *Jurnal Masyarakat dan Budaya*, vol. IV, no. 4, pp. 1-13 (2003)
2. C. Antweiler, "*Towards a Cosmopolitan Indonesia*," *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 340-363 (2019)
3. G. Roche, M. Hammime, J. F. C. Hernandez, and J. Kruk, "*The Politics of Fear and the Suppression of Indigenous Language Activism in Asia*," *State Crime Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 29-50 (2023)
4. S. Musgrave, "*Language Shift and Language Maintenance in Indonesia*," *Language, Education and Nation-building*, P. Sercombe and R. Tupas, Eds., New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2014) [Online]. Available: users.monash.edu.au/~smusgrav/publication/LMLS_Indonesia_Musgrave.pdf
5. D. M. Eberhard, G. F. Simons, and C. D. Fennig, "*Indonesia*," *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Eds., 26th ed. Dallas, Texas: SIL International (2023) [Online]. Available: <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ID/>
6. D. Butler, "*Peace and Harmony in the World based on Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*," *Jurnal Multikultural & Multireligius*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 33-40 (2016)
7. C. Logli, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (unity in diversity): Nationalism, ethnicity, and religion in Indonesian higher education*," Doctor of Philosophy in Education Dissertation, The Graduate Division The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (2015)
8. E. Wismiaty, "*Makna Bhineka Tunggal Ika*" [Online] Available: <https://ayoguruberbagi.kemdikbud.go.id/artikel/makna-bineka-tunggal-ika/>
9. R. Mustansyir, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika dalam Perspektif Filsafat Analitik*," *Jurnal Filsafat*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 46-58 (1995)
10. I. N. Pursika, "*Kajian Analitik terhadap Semboyan Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*," *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pengajaran*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 15-20 (2009)
11. H. M. Salim, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika sebagai Perwujudan Ikatan Adat-Adat Masyarakat Adat Nusantara*," *Al-daulah*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 65-74, June (2017)
12. Turiman, "*Analisis Semiotika Hukum terhadap Lambang Negara Republik Indonesia*," *Jurnal Hukum dan Pembangunan*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 313-347 (2013)
13. I. W. Arka, "*Local Autonomy, Local Capacity Building and Support for Minority Languages: Field Experiences from Indonesia*," in

- Documenting and Revitalizing Austronesian Languages, D. V. Rau and M. Florey Eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, ch. 5, pp. 66-92 (2007)
14. I. W. Arka, "*Maintaining Vera in Rongga: Struggles over Culture, Tradition, and Language in Modern Manggarai, Flores, Indonesia*," in *Endangered Languages of Austronesia*, M. Florey Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 5, pp. 90-109 (2010)
 15. I. W. Arka, "*Language Management and Minority Language Maintenance in (Eastern) Indonesia: Strategic Issues*," *Language Documentation and Conservation*, vol. 7, pp. 74-105 (2013) [Online]. Available: <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/lcdc/>; <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/4568>.
 16. Y. Kurniasih, "*Gender, Class and Language Preference: A Case Study in Yogyakarta*." [Online]. Available: <http://www.als.asn.au/proceedings/als2005/kurniasih-gender.pdf>
 17. A. Gunarwan, "*The Unstable State of the Indonesian-Javanese Bilingualism: Evidence from Language Use in the Home Domain*," presented at the II Simposio Internacional Bilinguismo, Vigo (Galicia, Spain), 23-26 October (2002) [Online]. Available: ssl.webs.uvigo.es.
 18. H. Purwoko, "*If Javanese is Endangered, How Should We Maintain It?*," presented at the International Seminar Language Maintenance and Shift, Semarang, Indonesia (2011)
 19. UNESCO. "*UN DESA Policy Brief No. 151: Why Indigenous Languages Matter: The International Decade on Indigenous Languages 2022-2032*." UNESCO. <https://idil2022-2032.org> (accessed 24 July, 2023).