

Customary authority and the language(s) of power

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Abstract

In the 1990's, the Kei Islands in the province of Amboina were transformed by the expansion of government offices and corporate activity. Some of the turbulence which affected the islands at the end of the decade reflects the differentiating impact of state presence on the Kei Islands society. The paper places these developments in a longer historical perspective by arguing that state power and traditional leadership have mutually defined each other for over a century. In the late colonial period, chiefs were increasingly drawn to the Dutch system of "indirect rule". One aspect of this system was customary law, defined as an "indigenous domain of justice" which nevertheless affirmed Malay as the language of ultimate authority. "Traditional authority" thus came to presuppose the affinity of Malay and state power which later came to be associated with Bahasa Indonesia.

The paper is concerned with the implications of these historical circumstances for present forms of traditional authority. Whereas local language has often ceased to define an independent domain of meaning, there are also examples in which local language is defended through its articulation with the national language. The paper describes a case, drawn from fieldwork in Kei during 1994-96, in which the rhetorical construction of authority is based on the skillful mixing of the local and national language. Such rhetoric maintains awareness of the boundary between the two linguistic codes, even as it creates an ambiguity over the local and national sources of power.

The affinity between traditional authority and the state language means that national politics constitutes the ultimate horizon for the self-construction of persons who claim and exercise customary authority. However, in spite of depending on the state as the source for the signs of their power, local leaders have often been capable of keeping actual policies and practices of the state at a distance in favor of defining their own political agenda. The question is how regional autonomy will transform the articulation between state power and local authority. Is one going to be co-opted by the other, and whose interests would be served by such development?