Why is Indonesia so reluctant to use its mother tongues in education and other contexts?

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With a population of more than 250 million, Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world. It is fortunate to possess 707 living languages, one in ten of all the languages in the world (Ethnologue 2016). For the first three decades after independence in 1945, state primary schools offered, as the medium of instruction, either a mother tongue (one of the eight most widely spoken local languages) or Bahasa Indonesia (the national language). Since 1975, however, the role of the mother tongues in the education system has been reduced to almost nothing. Over the same period, the local languages have been weakened in many other areas of activity as well, not only in education.

This paper focuses on the reasons behind this reluctance to recognize the local languages. These include contradictions in official language policy; inconsistency in the implementation of legislation; a sense that local languages (like religion and ethnicity) are a sensitive topic and are therefore better not discussed in public; apprehension about the dangers of national disintegration; the campaign to develop the national language; utilitarian views of the purpose of education; powerful myths regarding the benefits of English and when it should be taught; and lack of awareness of the dangers of neglecting the mother tongues.

Next, the paper looks briefly at the consequences of this state of affairs, particularly in educational outcomes. Finally, in line with the spirit of the conference, the paper presents a small number of more positive developments which have been observed recently.