



LANGUAGE SNAPSHOT

Teun, Nila, Serua – A Collection of Language Snapshots

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ABSTRACT

Teun, Nila, and Serua are three closely related Austronesian languages originally spoken on three islands with the same names in the Banda Sea of eastern Indonesia. In 1978 the speakers were forcibly relocated from their traditional homelands to Seram Island and this has impacted the vitality of all three languages, with language shift to Ambon Malay/Indonesian well underway. In general, speakers aged 65 and above can—and *do*—speak each language, those aged between 50–65 are mixed, and those aged below 50 only have a passive knowledge of the languages. These figures correlate with the relocation of the speakers; fluent speakers are usually only those who had reached adulthood in their island homelands.

RINGKASAN

Teun, Nila, dan Serua adalah tiga bahasa Austronesia yang memiliki pertautan. Tiga bahasa ini berasal dari tiga pulau yang berada di Lautan Banda, yaitu Pulau Teun, Pulau Nila, dan Pulau Serua (TNS), yang terletak di daerah Indonesia Timur. Pada tahun 1978, penduduk TNS dipindahkan dari



pulau-pulau asal mereka ke Pulau Seram. Pergeseran bahasa ke bahasa Melayu Ambon/Indonesia dalam setiap komunitas penutur bahasa TNS berlangsung secara baik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rata-rata penutur berusia 65 tahun ke atas masih dapat berbicara bahasa aslinya, penutur berusia 50–65 tahun tidak sepenuhnya berbicara menggunakan bahasa asli karena bercampur dengan bahasa Melayu Ambon/Indonesia, dan penutur berusia 50 tahun ke bawah dapat mengerti bahasa asli, tetapi tidak dapat berbicara. Angka ini berkorelasi dengan pemindahan masyarakat TNS dari pulau-pulau asal mereka. Penutur yang lancar adalah mereka yang tumbuh dewasa di pulau-pulau asal mereka.

Keywords: Teun; Nila; Serua; Maluku; Austronesian

Language names:	Teun	Nila	Serua
Language family:	Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Timor-Babar, Southwest Maluku		
ISO 639-3 code:	tve	nil	srw
Population:	65	109	c. 372
Locations (historic):	–6.97, 129.14	–6.73, 129.51	–6.31, 130.02
Locations (present):	–3.22, 129.06	–3.22, 129.01	–3.20, 129.01
Vitality rating (UNESCO):	severely endangered	severely endangered	definitely endangered

LANGUAGE IDENTIFICATION

Teun, Nila, and Serua (TNS) are three closely related languages originally spoken on three islands with the same names in the Banda Sea of eastern Indonesia (see [Figure 1](#)). (Throughout this article, “TNS” is used as an abbreviation for the languages or islands when it is appropriate to refer to them as a group.) All three languages have a similar history and socio-linguistic profile and are thus treated together in this article. I provide an overview of the history, language situation, previous research, and current vitality of each language based on original fieldwork.

Fieldwork was carried out over two periods in Waipia on Seram Island (the current location of the speakers of the languages). In December 2023, I spent four nights in Waipia and collected a 505-item wordlist and short texts for each language. I returned in July 2024 and stayed eleven nights and collected socio-linguistic information for each language and additional texts in Teun and Nila. Recordings have been archived at the Endangered Languages Archive (Edwards 2023) and the texts are available on the YouTube channel of the Endangered Language Alliance (Endangered Language Alliance 2024).

HISTORY

Teun, Nila, and Serua are three volcanic islands of the inner Banda Arc in the Banda Sea. The islands have been involved in trade networks that have spanned the archipelago for centuries.

They were among many nutmeg-producing islands in pre-colonial times. Riedel (1886:446–468), citing an unnamed source, reports that the nutmeg trees were removed from the islands by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the mid-17th century. Despite resistance from the inhabitants, approximately 7,000 trees were removed from Nila in 1652 with all remaining trees removed in 1673. Similarly, nutmeg trees were removed from Serua in 1661. This move, along with similar efforts on Damer and Roma, was deliberately designed by the VOC in order to concentrate the production of nutmeg in the Banda Islands (the cluster of islands marked “Banda” in Figure 1) to better monopolize the trade and maintain high profits.

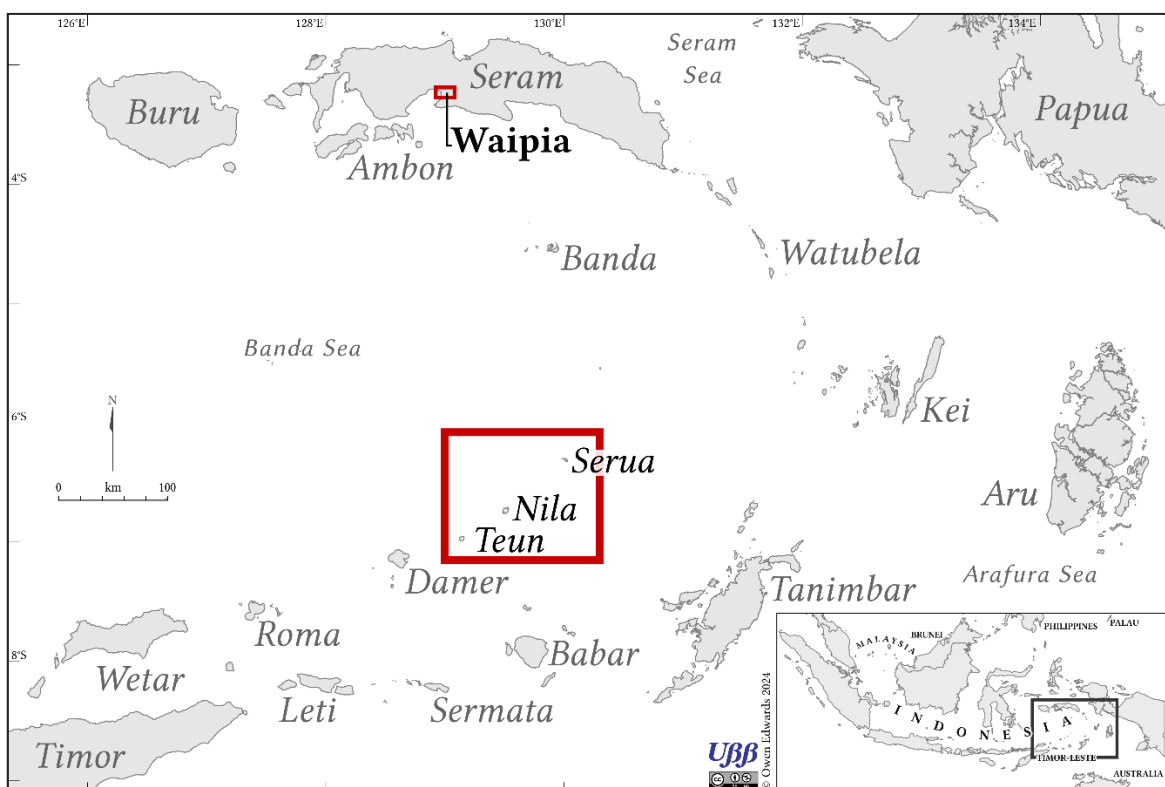


Figure 1: Teun, Nila, Serua, and the resettlement area, Waipia, in the Maluku Islands.

Another major disruption came to the islands in the late 20th century, when the authoritarian Suharto regime enforced the relocation of the inhabitants to Seram Island. The reason provided by the government was the eruption of the volcano on Nila Island in 1968. The relocation, officially termed an “evacuation” (Indonesian *evakuasi*), occurred in 1978—ten years after this eruption—and was imposed on all residents of TNS, not just those on Nila.¹ Most residents protested against the relocation and found the official justification problematic. Nonetheless, it went ahead and in March 1978 the inhabitants were escorted to Seram Island. After two years living in trying conditions in barracks in the town of Makariki, they were eventually resettled in the northeastern part of Elpaputih Bay, in an area locally known as Waipia after the Waipia river to the west (Pannell 1999).

¹ Van Engelenhoven (2003:59) reports six waves of arrivals beginning in 1964 and ending in 1983, with the vast majority (79%) arriving in 1979. He cites Ellen (1993b) as the source for this, which may be a misattribution to Ellen (1993a:196). However, he appears to have additional sources as Ellen (1993a) does not provide the exact figures cited by van Engelenhoven (2003).

Despite this relocation, the people retain strong links to the islands. Some have returned to live there permanently and others return periodically for months at a time to harvest the clove crops from their original gardens and to collect produce from the sea.²

Villages

There were seventeen villages on TNS, given in Figure 2: four Teun speaking, six Nila speaking, four Serua speaking, and two Wetan speaking (Wetan is a member of the Luang language/dialect cluster; ISO 639-6 [lex]).³ Four of the Nila-speaking villages were clustered together in Rumdai. Rumdai is referred to as a “township/borough” (Dutch *vlek*) or “region” (Dutch *streek*) in Holleman (1943:381, 410), and it consisted of four villages (Dutch *negorij, dorpje*): Kokroman, Kuralele, Ameth [‘amet], and Usliapan.

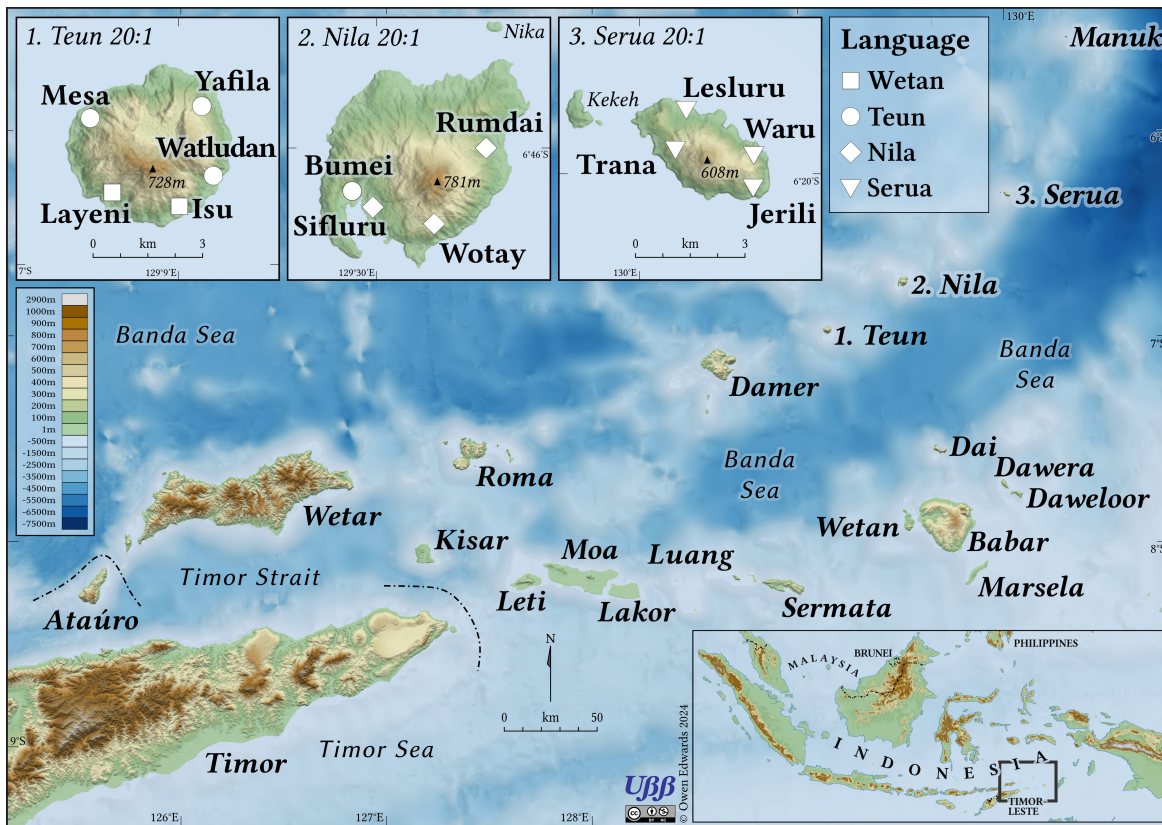


Figure 2: TNS within southwest Maluku and locations of traditional villages.⁴

² Apart from those who have returned, there are no other permanent residents on TNS. Pannell (1999:140) reported that at the time of her research people from other parts of Indonesia frequently visited the islands to “[...] take produce from the gardens and help themselves to commercially valuable marine species”. Nowadays there are always at least a small number of TNS people in their original village locations year-round.

³ Van Engelenhoven (2003:60, 78) reports that Serua is spoken in Sifluru and Wotay. My consultants from both these villages report that they speak Nila, which is confirmed by my linguistic data.

⁴ Village locations in Figure 2 are based on Riedel (1886:464f), Holleman (1943:380, 480), Army Map Service (1963), and van Engelenhoven (2003:52). The position of Bumei and Sifluru follows van Engelenhoven (2003:52) and Holleman (1943), the latter of which has the most detailed information (including on fishing rights for villages on Nila). Other sources have the locations of Bumei and Sifluru reversed. The geographic data are from Badan Informasi Geospasial (2018) and Global Volcanism Program (2023a, b, c).

These villages are retained as administrative villages (*desa*) in Waipia on Seram, as shown in Figure 3. Together, all these villages, except Yafila, comprise the district (Indonesian *kecamatan*) “Teon Nila Serua”, along with Nakupia and Tonetanah, two villages whose inhabitants are not from TNS. Yafila belongs to the district of Amahai.

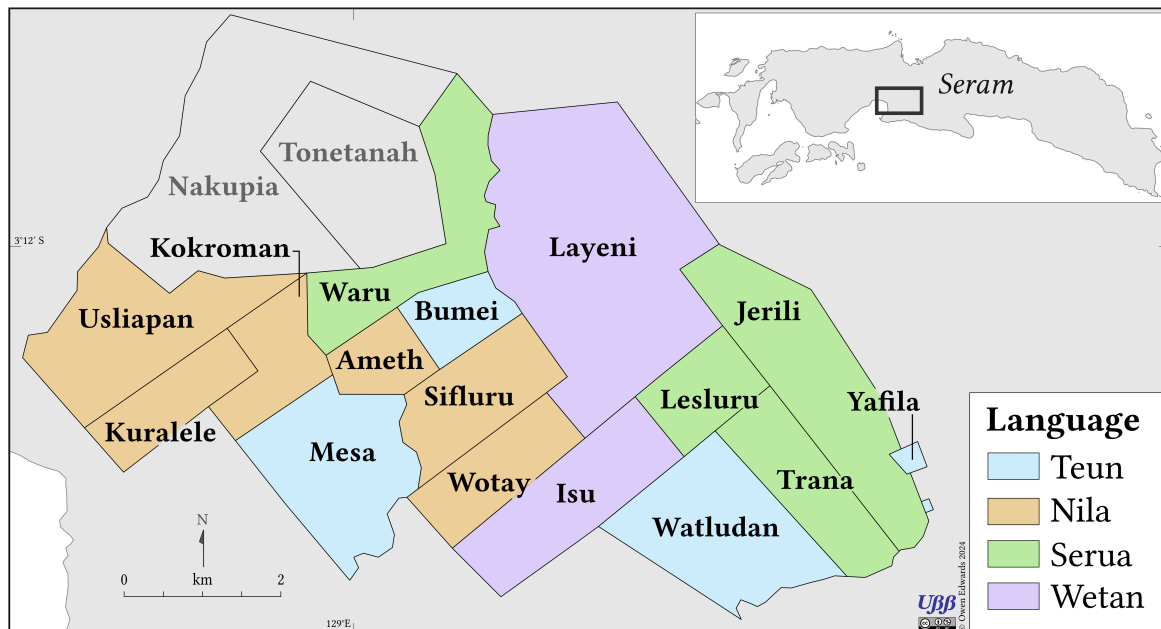


Figure 3: Teon Nila Serua district and Yafila in Waipia (Seram).

Affiliation

TNS are Austronesian languages and are connected to other languages of southwest Maluku. Taber (1993) places them in a Southwest Maluku group based on lexical similarity. Grimes and Edwards (forthcoming) place them in the Southwest Maluku node of their Timor-Babar subgroup based on shared sound changes. Lexically, Nila and Serua are most similar to each other (Taber 1993), while shared sound changes support placing Teun and Nila together (Grimes and Edwards forthcoming). The lexical similarity reported by Taber (1993:405) is given in Table 1.

VILLAGE	LANGUAGE
Mesa	Teun
84 Yafila	Teun
81 83 Bumei	Teun
65 68 74 Kokroman	Nila
63 64 70 77 Waru	Serua
64 64 70 75 97 Trana	Serua

Table 1: TNS lexical similarity (Taber 1993:405).

Within each language there are dialect differences or differences between villages. Two varieties of Nila can be identified. The variety spoken in Rumdai (Kokroman, Kuralele, Ameth, and Usliapan) has intervocalic *f > h and a split *f > f, h word initially, while Wotay and Sifluru retain *f = f in all positions. A selection of examples is given in Table 2 to illustrate.

WOTAY	KOKROMAN	GLOSS
<i>fer-feru</i>	<i>fer-feru</i>	‘new’
<i>flafa</i>	<i>flaha</i>	‘mouse, rat’
<i>fia</i>	<i>hia</i>	‘banana’
<i>fafi</i>	<i>hahi</i>	‘pig’
<i>sifa</i>	<i>siha</i>	‘chicken’
<i>wafu</i>	<i>wahu</i>	‘land, soil’

Table 2: Reflexes of *f in Nila.

For Teun and Nila, variant pronunciations of certain individual words occur in different villages, such as Yafila Teun *mesni* ‘one’ but Mesa Teun *mesnu* ‘one’, or Waru Serua *wia* ‘banana’ but Lesluru Serua *bia* ‘banana’.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A small amount of work has been published on TNS. Taber (1993) contains a 190-item wordlist from each language: Teun from either Yafila or Bumei villages, Nila from Kokroman village, and Serua from either Waru or Trana villages. To date, Taber is the only published data on Nila.

For Teun, there is a short description of nominal phrases (Erniata & Wijaya 2023), a short dictionary produced by the Maluku Language Office (Pasapan et al. 2022), and a 1500-item wordlist collected in 1937 (Stokhof 1981).⁵

For Serua, van Engelenhoven (2003, 2010) presents some grammatical notes on attributive nominal phrases, possessive paradigms, and verbal inflection along with half a dozen example sentences. Chlenov and Chlenova (2004) also present some grammatical notes collected through elicitation, and Chlenova (2004) is a 521-item wordlist. A 61-page Serua dictionary has been produced by the Maluku Language Office (Hasan et al. 2021). There are also three unpublished resources, which I have not been able to access: a conference paper (Collins 1991), a sketch-grammar of aspects of Serua (Workala 1993), and the final chapter of Workala (2017) which is otherwise focused on the history of Serua Island. This chapter is based on Workala (1993).

⁵ This wordlist is number 224b of the so-called “Holle lists”. These were a series of wordlists distributed throughout Indonesia between 1894 and 1939 by the Dutch colonial authorities in order to “obtain a more detailed knowledge of the linguistic situation of the Dutch colony” (Stokhof 1980:1). The Holle list 224b in Stokhof (1981:161–174) is labelled “Niala [...] from the village of Boemei [Bumei]” and represents the Teun language, which was spoken in Bumei on the island of Nila (see Figure 2). This list was reportedly collected in the “Latoerake [Laturake], Mountains in the Riring region, West-Ceram”. The origins of this list represent an unresolved puzzle. Collins (1982:197) states regarding this list (based on the limited metadata which accompanies it): “The informant, Matheus Soeplatoe, was a native speaker of Alune; he was the head of a village near Riring, the military garrison and prison of West Seram in the colonial period. [...] How Bpk Matheus learned Nila [sic.] remains a puzzle. He may have served as a soldier or catechist there or he may have learned the language through a prisoner in the forced labour camp in Riring.”

Although not on TNS, Chlenova (2006) presents some grammatical data and a 521-item wordlist of the variety of Wetan (Luang language/dialect cluster) spoken in Layeni village.

Finally, a 505-item wordlist and several recorded texts for each language have been archived with ELAR as part of a documentation project on the languages of southwest Maluku, carried out by the author (Edwards 2023).

LANGUAGE VITALITY

TNS are all endangered, with language shift to Ambon Malay/Indonesian well underway.⁶ Serua is the strongest language and is spoken in some villages in a few exceptional families by those with young children, but even in those families the language is not actively used by children.

At the beginning of July 2024, I travelled to each TNS village in Waipia and collected data on the population and number of speakers. This data was collected in Ambon Malay/Indonesian with key consultants, either staff of the village office, and/or the traditional king of each village and corroborated with multiple consultants whenever possible. I asked for the number of people who were fluent in each language (*berapa orang yang fasih bahasa ...*), and collected the names and (estimated) ages of those recognised as fluent speakers. I did not gather detailed information on language use as I was not present long enough to observe language use in each location.

Speaker numbers

The population figures and speaker numbers I collected are summarised in [Table 3](#). For reasons explained further below, I believe that the actual number of speakers is higher than these numbers. Population figures for 2010 are from Badan Pusat Statistik (2012). Population figures for 2024 were collected either from the corresponding village office, or estimated based on the 2010 figures. Exact numbers of Serua speakers were not collected, due to the large number of estimated speakers in each village.

The general pattern is that people aged 65 and above can speak TNS fluently. People aged between 50 and 65 are demographically mixed: some are fluent while others have varying degrees of proficiency. Those aged below 50 are not usually fluent with only occasional exceptions. It was consistently reported that those who do not speak TNS can understand and/or have a limited degree of proficiency.

In every village except Layeni, the lists of speakers I collected have more men than women. They are most balanced in Yafila and Kokroman, with the difference attributable to the actual situation: Yafila (24 men = 57% of reported speakers), Kokroman (17 men = 59% of reported speakers). However, in other villages the difference is much higher, with at least 70% of speakers reported to be men. In all villages except Wotay and Mesa, my consultants were also men. Thus, I suspect that there are additional women who are fluent speakers in Watludan, Bumei, Sifluru, Wotay, Ameth, Usliapan, and Kuralele but who were not named by my consultants, perhaps due to differing social circles. If the figures in [Table 3](#) were adjusted by adding these “missing” women so that there is a more balanced number of male and female speakers, it would add approximately 40 Nila speakers and 10 Teun speakers.

⁶ Ambon Malay is the local lingua franca version of Malay while Indonesian is the national language which serves high functions in diglossia.

A further caveat must be added to the speaker numbers presented in Table 3. In each location I asked for the number of fluent (*fasih* or *lancar*) speakers. While I was explicit that this included people who were fluent in everyday speech (*bahasa sehari-hari*)—not just those who were particularly eloquent or who knew traditional stories—what exactly qualified as “fluent” was left to the judgment of my consultants, and there was occasionally disagreement among between them. I suspect that some of my consultants had a rather high standard in mind for a speaker to be classified as fluent, and a proper socio-linguistic survey may show there are more speakers in each village.

VILLAGE	POPULATION		NUMBER OF SPEAKERS			AVERAGE AGE	RELIABILITY OF INFORMATION
	2010	2024	TEUN	NILA	SERUA		
Isu	868	≈1,024	1			79	very high
Layeni	2,271	2,474	2			≈60	medium
Mesa	744	815	2			≈76	medium
Yafila (Jafila)	488	≈576	42			55+	very high
Watludan	1,036	≈1,222	9			≈66	medium
Bumei (Bumey)	617	865	7			76	medium
Sifluru	487	537	2	7		≈64	low
Wotay (Wotai)	687	725		40		67	very high
Ameth (Amet)	512	623		13		63	medium
Usliapan	576	685		7		67	low
Kuralele	455	552		13		74	medium
Kokroman	337	422		29		68	very high
Waru	1,021	≈1,205			≈172	≈65	very high
Jerili	1,092	≈1,289			≈60	60+	high
Trana (Terana)	530	646			≈40	60+	very high
Lesluru	451	530			≈100	50+	medium
Nakupia	526	≈621					
Tonetanah	647	≈763					
	13,345	15,574	65	109	≈372	67	

Table 3: Populations and speaker numbers of villages in Waipia. Figures preceded by ≈ are estimates. Those villages with estimated population numbers are based on the 2010 Census data increased by the average growth in other villages ($\times 1.18$). Estimates of Serua speakers were those provided by consultants in each village. The number of speakers in Watludan, Bumei, Sifluru, Wotay, Ameth, Usliapan, and Kuralele given here is probably actually higher due to women being under-reported.

Before moving on, some comments on the population numbers in [Table 3](#) are also needed. TNS district has a rather large number of immigrants from areas of Maluku other than TNS. Indeed, two villages (Nakupia and Tonetanah) are entirely made up of immigrants. In 2000, during the Maluku sectarian conflict, 8,650 internally displaced persons fled to TNS district, comprising nearly half the population (van Engelenhoven 2003:63). While many of these people have left since the end of the conflict, there remain a large number of immigrants who do not originate from TNS Islands.

Language use

Although I did not collect systematic or detailed data on language use, I report here what information I have. Each language is in regular use among speakers, which accounts for the fact that those who do not speak the language can understand it.

In Bumei it was reported that speakers use the language at home, even if their wives are not fluent speakers. In Ameth it was reported that marriage negotiations and ceremonies (*masuk minta*) are carried out in Nila and that when people gather, the language is frequently heard. At a traditional wedding solemnization I attended in Yafila in December 2023, I heard many people conversing in Teun before the formalities commenced and I observed my Yafila consultants conversing in Teun in July 2024.

Serua is the most vital language, and child-directed speech in Serua occasionally occurs in Serua-speaking villages. One of my Serua consultants in Lesluru reported that she uses the language with her children and grandchildren. Similarly, in Waru it was reported that the language is used on a daily basis by those above 70, and that these elders also speak it to children, but that the children respond in Ambon Malay/Indonesian. Waru is recognised throughout the area as the village in which language use is strongest. My main consultant in Waru was 36 years old and a fluent speaker of the language. He estimated that another four or five people between 30 and 40 were fluent speakers, but that no one below the age of 30 was fluent. Serua was previously taught in the primary school in Waru as part of local content (*muatan lokal*) but this ceased when the teacher passed away.

In most places it was reported that ritual speech (called *bahasa tana* in the area) is no longer spoken, but in Yafila and Lesluru a small number of elders can speak it, and it is used in appropriate contexts, such as the traditional marriage solemnization I attended in December 2023.

The patterns observed for Teun, Nila, and Serua also apply to the Wetan-speaking villages of Isu and Layeni. In Layeni my consultant explicitly reported the same pattern: those who were adults when relocated speak Wetan, but children no longer use it. Note, however, that by all reports Wetan remains in vigorous use on Wetan Island.

Taking all the above factors into consideration, I present in [Table 4](#) an assessment of language vitality according to the UNESCO language endangerment classification (Moseley 2010) and the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) (Lewis and Simons 2010).

LANGUAGE	UNESCO	EGIDS	SPEAKERS
Teun	Severely endangered	8a	65
Nila	Severely endangered	8a	109
Serua	Definitely endangered	7	≈ 372

Table 4: Language endangerment ratings.

CONCLUSION

The forced relocation of the inhabitants of Teun, Nila, and Serua has clearly been detrimental to the vitality of each language. Although language shift to Malay/Indonesian is common throughout Indonesia, for Teun, Nila, and Serua the acceleration of this shift coincides with the relocation of the people from their traditional homelands. While all three languages are clearly endangered, there is also a basis for hope. The languages are used frequently by those who speak them and there are a reasonable number of speakers. Nonetheless, a significant shift in attitude and practice is needed for the languages to be transmitted to children to enable their survival. Intervention would help community leaders become aware that they are at a crossroad facing language choice as a community, and this will impact language ecology and local identities into the future.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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