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## Language Maintenance As Identity Construction In Jalawastu Traditional Community of Brebes Central Java

Eko Wahyu Koeshandoyo <sup>1\*</sup>, Kunto Sofianto <sup>2</sup>, Budi Gustaman Sunarya <sup>2</sup>,  
Ayu Septiani <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Department of History and Philology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia

\* Correspondence Author: [e.w.koeshandoyo@unpad.ac.id](mailto:e.w.koeshandoyo@unpad.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

Studies on indigenous communities have been conducted with various results on cultural elements as their research focus. Language, as one of those elements, is an essential factor in the survival of the traditions and beliefs. This article discusses how the Jalawastu community maintains their indigenous language of Brebes Sundanese dialect in Javanese-speaking culture in Central Java. The novelty of this study was to discover how the traditional community perceived their language, why they needed to maintain it, and what obstacles they had in the process. This ethnographic research was conducted in Jalawastu Cultural Village in Desa Cisureuh, Kecamatan Ketanggungan, Kabupaten Brebes between October 2022 and May 2023. Data was collected using in-depth interviews and observation. Those who participated in this study were *kuncen*, (cultural council chief), *pemangku adat* (traditional ruler), *kepala dusun* (the village chief), and Jalawastu community member. The study revealed that the community attempted to maintain their dialect because they viewed the importance of their language in their daily verbal interaction, both in social activities and rituals, and the need to hold their social identity as Jalawastu village members. The attempt to preserve the use of the language was based on the social belief, that is, to respect their ancestors in order to avoid misfortunes. These efforts were once hindered when the provincial government imposed the language policy to teach only Javanese in elementary schools instead of Sundanese. With Brebes Bupati's regional decrees, they could eventually teach back the language in formal elementary schools.

## 1. Introduction

Language fulfills its function as a means of communication, reflects the speaking community's culture, and represents the identity of language users as a group or society with sovereignty and character. It is frequently used as a crucial indicator of cultural heritage. Language differences among communities or ethnic groups can play a significant role in defining their own cultural identities.

In addition to the critical value of language as a cultural supporter, language also has a strategic position in the construction of national identity, as seen in Chapter XV Article 36 of the 1945 Constitution, which emphasizes that the *State Language is Indonesian* which is emphasized by the issuance of Article 40 of Law Number 24 of 2009 concerning Flags, Language, and State Emblems and the National Anthem *Indonesia Raya*. Chapter III of the law contains articles containing national language policies, namely Article 25 to Article 45. This regulation is further strengthened by Presidential Regulation (Perpres) Number 63 of 2019 concerning the language used in various domains to ensure its existence and sustainability. This measure can be seen as a government effort in the field of language maintenance to keep its vitality as a national and official language.

Language maintenance can be viewed as "the continued use or retention of an L1 (or main language), a minority or heritage language in one or more spheres of language use" (Pauwels, 2016:20). This may be seen as a joint effort in speech communities who aim to maintain their existence and consider that their language is part of their identity that distinguishes them from other communities, as well as a national symbol.

In general, six factors can lead to language maintenance, namely: concentrated area with the use of similar language, language loyalty, continuous language inheritance, formal language learning at school, language use in mass media or literary works, and frequent return to hometown (Chaer & Agustina, 2010:147). Other important supporting factors that contribute to the continual use of a language are many speakers, concentrated residence, cultural identity, pride, and improved economic conditions (Winford, 2003: 306). In addition, in language maintenance effort, there are essential elements that support its success, namely the domain of language use in which a language is expected to survive, namely family domain, friendship domain, religion domain, social group and community domain, occupation domain, and education domain (Pauwels, 2016:90). This means when a language is spoken in those domains, there is a more significant possibility that it survives. The more speakers and the wider the domain of language use, the greater the possibility of survival or even its development. Therefore, the sustainability of a language is very dependent on its speakers' intensive use in various parts of their daily lives.

On a smaller scale, Indonesia comprises many regional languages and dialects. These languages can survive, of course, because of the support of their speakers. One of the regional languages with a significant number of speakers is Sundanese. This language is usually associated with the geographical area of West Java. However, it turns out that the language area is not the same as the

geographical area because a Sundanese language group outside West Java resides in Central Java, precisely in the Brebes area, which is directly adjacent to West Java Province. Brebes Regency is a house for an indigenous community known as Jalawastu, which inhabits Jalawastu Traditional Village in one of its areas and uses Sundanese as its mother tongue in daily communication. As a community that struggles to preserve its identity and culture in the Javanese-speaking area, this study aims to discover how they construct their identity through Sundanese language maintenance. This article also discusses the constraints they meet in maintaining their language. Some research has been conducted in this community, and most of the researchers focused on the annual Ngasa ritual, such as Adawiyah (2022), Mubarok et al. (2019), and Permata & Birsyada (2022). They discuss the significance of the ritual and the community's life. Sasangka (2006) compares Brebes Sundanese dialect, spoken in Brebes Regency, with Priangan Sundanese, widely spoken in West Java. He points out some fundamental differences, which show that the two languages or dialects are mutually intelligible, while Suyanto (2018) discusses the number of Sundanese speakers in Central Java to prove that Sundanese speakers were the minority in Central Java and lived in a clustered area. Lastly, Imelda (2021 and 2023) argues that the local government's regulations on Javanese language teaching disregard the minority and may have harmed the language maintenance of Brebes Sundanese.

This research explores the connection between Brebes Sundanese and its speakers in the indigenous community of Jalawastu in Kabupaten Brebes Central Java. As it holds its distinct linguistic character in Javanese-speaking neighborhoods, the community deliberately keeps the dialect as its social identity and its effort to maintain it. With the ethnographic approach, this study highlights the novelty of its research objects in the research area: the people with their shared cultural myths and how they view the importance of the language they speak. This research shows that language maintenance is an essential part of the social construction of identity in the Indigenous community as a part of adherence to its shared belief, which they still preserve.

## 2. Method

To understand how the people of Jalawastu viewed their language, researchers chose an ethnographic approach with descriptive-qualitative methods. The study was conducted between October 2022 and May 2023.

In this study, data collection techniques comprised observation and interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with the informants in order to gather the research data. Four informants were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. All of whom were the residents of Jalawastu, consisting of a *kuncen* (cultural council chief), a *pemangku adat* (traditional ruler), a *kepala dusun* (village chief), and a community member.

Daryono (80 years) is the *kuncen* of the sacred ground Dayeuh Lemah Kaputihan in the village, used for the annual Ngasa ritual. He also took the lead in the ritual and prayed during the festival. Ki Dastam (57 years) is the traditional ruler and

usually became the person to look for when people wanted to know more about the village's customs and traditions. He worked as a teacher at a public elementary school. Wusto Widodo (38 years) is the village chief and had been in the position for about years by the time of the interview, while Rizal (35 years), a community member and a farmer and actively took part in village activities.

In-depth interviews and observation are two combined data collection methods. The interviews were initiated through FGD with four informants, and in the end, each of them was interviewed separately. They were asked to describe the social culture of the people, the customs and livelihood of the people, and their view on the importance of their spoken language, including all the difficulties they had in terms of language use and language maintenance efforts. While in-depth interviews were aimed at exploring the importance of their spoken language and the difficulties they experience in terms of language use and language maintenance efforts. We also took part in the village activities, such as regular meetings and daily labor such as working in the fields and communal work along with our informants.

The data were analyzed through coding or selecting and classifying the data based on the concepts and categories in the research. The interview questions were based on three categories: their explicit knowledge and a conscious perception on their language use (their language awareness), how they viewed their language or the commitment to their native or inherited language as a sign of respect for the language and its culture (language loyalty), and what they did to preserve the language (language maintenance). The collected data were also cross-checked by comparing the interview results from all four informants to see the validity of the data.

As Hammersley (2019:1-13) stated that the central commitments of research ethics were minimizing harm, respecting autonomy, preserving privacy, and offering some reciprocity. The field visit, interviews, observation, and the publication were under the verbal consent of the informants although no written approval was produced. All the interviews were done in Sundanese. All the names of the informants are their real names under their verbal consent.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

#### **• Jalawastu Traditional Village**

Brebes Regency is one of the largest regencies in Central Java Province, with most of its territory in the form of lowlands. In the southwest, there are highlands (with the highest peaks being Mount Pojok Tiga and Mount Kumbang), while in the southeast, mountains that are part of Mount Slamet can be found.

Brebes Regency consists of 17 sub-districts, namely Salem, Bantarkawung, Bumiayu, Paguyangan, Sirampog, Tonjong, Larangan, Ketanggungan, Banjarharjo, Losari, Tanjung, Kersana, Bulakamba, Wanasari, Songgom, Jatibarang, and Brebes. The natural conditions favor agriculture, making the regency famous as a shallot-producing area.

Figure 1. The Jalawastu traditional village<sup>1</sup>



The Cultural Village of Jalawastu located in Desa Ciseureuh, Kecamatan Ketanggungan, Kabupaten Brebes, Central Java Province. It received its status as a cultural heritage area based on The Ordinance of Kabupaten Brebes Number 13 in the year 2019 (Pratama et al., 2023:1). It also received the Intangible cultural heritage status from the government in October 2019 because of its distinct cultural rite.<sup>2</sup> The village is approximately 18 km from the capital of Ketanggungan Sub-district, and its distance from Ciseureuh Village is 4.8 km. This traditional village has a small, steep access road that is difficult to pass by 4-wheeled vehicles when passing each other (see also Rokhman (2020: 24-25)) and marked with traditional housings (see Figure 1 above). According to Ki Dastam (57), the *pemangku adat*, the village is unique not only because it is the site of the annual Ngasa traditional ceremony that attracts cultural observers but also because the village has a distinct way of living by observing various myths and taboos. For instance, the village dutifully preserves the sanctity on the sacred ground called Lemah Dayeuh Kaputihan, in which the Ngasa festival is held every year and a *Kuncen* or caretaker is appointed as a guardian of the place and the conductor of the festival procession.

There is no conclusive historical evidence of when this village started to form. The Jalawastu people believe that it is an old hermitage site. Based on Ki Dastam's explanation, when asked about the history of the village, the name might come from the word *jala* or net and *wastu*, which was modified from *watu* or stone as a legend says once there was a fisherman who was casting his net in the river in the area and came up with nothing but rocks. The name might come from combining two hermits, Begawat Jala-jala and Wastu Kencana. According

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<sup>1</sup> <https://kabartegal.pikiran-rakyat.com/wisata-kuliner/pr-934297378/mengintip-kampung-adat-jalawastu-brebes-yang-memiliki-banyak-keunikan-tradisi-dan-keindahan-alam>), accessed on 5 May 2023.

<sup>2</sup> [https://jatengprov.go.id/beritadaerah/lestarian-adat-ngasa-kampung-jalawastu-dinobatkan-sebagai-warisan-budaya/#:~:text=Tahun%20ini%2C%20Upacara%20Adat%20Ngasa,\(WBTB\)%20kategori%20ritus%20adat](https://jatengprov.go.id/beritadaerah/lestarian-adat-ngasa-kampung-jalawastu-dinobatkan-sebagai-warisan-budaya/#:~:text=Tahun%20ini%2C%20Upacara%20Adat%20Ngasa,(WBTB)%20kategori%20ritus%20adat), accessed on 23 July 2023.

to Daryono (80 years), the *kuncen* of Lemah Buyut Kaputihan, the villagers believe their village is a holy and sacred place whose sanctity requires protection by observing rituals and keeping various *pamali* or taboos. One of the practices is Ngasa Ceremony every year as a form of obedience and respect to Batara Windu Buana, who is considered the creator of the universe, and his servant, an ascetic named Guriang Panutus, whom they believe to be their ancestor. This obedience and respect are also shown in the culture they support, which maintains various taboos and myths that are still solemnly observed. Such belief includes the villagers' adherence to not eating rice and animate condiments (Adawiyah, 2022; Mubarok et al., 2019). The life of the people must follow the prohibitions passed down from generation to generation; for instance, they are not allowed to raise cattle poultry, except chicken and fish, plant crops such as radish, soybean, and peanut, perform art performances especially those that involve gong, and erect houses with cement, ceramics, and clay roof tiles. With the taboo on building construction, all the houses in the village are made from wooden boards and dried cogon grass, such as the roof, with no tiles on the floor, as shown in Figure 2 below. They believe that if they break the taboos, misfortune may occur, as confirmed by Daryono and Ki Dastam. In addition, the community uses Brebes Sundanese dialect to introduce daily activities, such as social events and traditional ceremonies, and daily activities, and its use is in oral form. Daryono stated that "We are Sundanese. We have always been [in love with the language] since the time of Guriang Panutus, our ancestor. That is why we keep using it as our ancestors required it." Brebes Sundanese dialect is also still spoken when the villagers leave the village, for example, to pursue education because there are no educational institutions in the village, both formal and informal one, and other needs to go to the nearest village, namely Grogol Village, which is approximately one kilometer away to pursue education. The village's location on the highlands of Gunung Kumbang causes geographical obstacles to be overcome by climbing or descending the mountain which takes some effort to both go outside and reach the village.

Figure 2. Daryono, the *Kuncen* of Jalawastu Village, in front of his traditional house



Source: Personal documentation, 2022

### • Brebes Sundanese Dialect

Brebes Sundanese is a dialect of Sundanese commonly used in some parts of the Brebes Regency, and the people who use this dialect can be found in Salem, Bantarharjo, and Bantarkawung sub-districts. At the same time, there are only a few villages that use Brebes Sundanese in Losari, Tanjung, Kersana, Ketanggungan, and Larangan sub-districts (Sasangka, 2006: 44). This shows that administrative areas are not the same as language areas because of the elements of migration or population movement and language contact. The influence of Sundanese culture can be observed in the naming practice of the places, which reveals Sundanese influence. This practice can be seen in the location of the Jalawastu traditional village, Ciseureuh Village, which comes from the Sundanese language, *ci* or water and *seureuh* betel.

Another interesting point relates to linguistic issues. Given its location directly adjacent to West Java Province, which is often associated with Sundanese culture, it seems inherent that there are Sundanese-speaking communities. However, it is interesting to note that the kind of Sundanese in Brebes should be specifically named 'Brebes Sundanese,' which certainly implies a difference from the one widely spoken in West Java, often referred to as Priyangan Sundanese.

Of the 17 sub-districts in Brebes Regency, eight sub-districts have areas with residents who use Sundanese, namely Salem, Bantarkawung, Ketanggungan, Banjarharjo, several villages in Losari Sub-district (Randegan, Jatisawit, Karangsembung, Negla, Bojongsari, Karangjunti, and Babakan Villages), Tanjung Sub-district (Sarireja and Luwung Bata Villages), Larangan Sub-district (Kamal, Wlahar, and Pamulihan Villages), and Kersana Sub-district (Kradenan and Sindangjaya Villages) (Sasangka, 2006: 44) as shown in Figure 3 below. According to BPS, based on the 2010 Population Census, the total population of Central Java is 32,382,657 people, 1.78% (578,164 people) out of the total population of Central Java aged over five years use Sundanese as their daily language. In Central Java, this number ranks second as the language with the highest number of speakers. Nationally, Sundanese speakers in Central Java Province rank third as the most Sundanese language users after West Java Province and Banten Province (Suyanto, 2018:202).

Figure 3. The Language Map in Brebes<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> <https://m.facebook.com/infokabbrebes/photos/a.123415937823704/944462482385708/>, accessed on 12 March 2023.

This Brebes Sundanese dialect differs from the Priyangan Sundanese, which is used widely in West Java Province. The word *Priyangan* refers to the area of Cianjur, Bandung, Sumedang, Garut, Tasikmalaya, Sukabumi, Bogor, and Ciamis regencies, which traditionally constituted the geographical area of the former Sundanese kingdom (Ekadjati, 2009:11) or what Ayatrohaedi (in Sasangka, 2006:45) calls *basa sakola* or school language, that is *basa sunda lulugu* or Sundanese language spoken in the city of Bandung. The difference between Brebes Sundanese and Priyangan Sundanese is not at the level of phrases and sentences but in terms of intonation and vocabulary. Sasangka (2006:47-50) indicates that at least 170 different vocabularies in the two language variants or dialects, and 31 of these vocabularies are influenced by or have similarities with Javanese vocabularies. This linguistic fact seems to be very reasonable considering the location of the Brebes Sundanese speech group, which is in or close to an area where Javanese is spoken.

The interesting difference between these two dialects is the concept of language levels or *undak usuk* language. As is known, standard Sundanese has three levels of language, namely *lemes* (polite/smooth), *loma* (medium), and rough style. The *lemes* style is usually used to show respect, *loma* is for equals, and rough one is spoken between close acquaintances and as an expression of disrespect. This linguistic feature was influenced by the invasion and control of the Mataram Kingdom because from 1624 to 1708, Mataram ruled the Priyangan land. Javanese, which became the blueprint of Priyangan Sundanese, is known to possess a complex linguistically marked politeness system based on assessments of the relative status of interlocutors. It has at least four language levels to select when someone is speaking to other people. When the wrong language level is used, then that person may be deemed impolite (Holmes, 2013:142-143). One of the impacts of the conquest of the Priyangan region was the mandatory use of Javanese in the Solo and Yogya dialects as the official language of instruction in administrative matters between the center of power (Keraton Mataram) and the Kadipaten regions. Javanese became the language of the political elite and rulers. This subtle language is influenced by power differentials that include differences in social status, age, and kinship relations. As a marker of power relations, refined language is used to conquer the noble or high nobility and Dutch officials (Lubis, 1998: 211-212). The use of this level of language had an impact on the development of Sundanese in the Priyangan region.

Sundanese was originally an egalitarian and democratic language. This character can be seen in all manuscripts dating back to the 16th century Sundanese Kingdom, such as Sanghyang Siksakandang Karesian (1518) and Carita Parahyangan (around 1580) using very egalitarian language and in old Sundanese manuscripts and inscriptions before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, words in the refined language level are not found. As a result of Mataram's domination of the Priyangan region, the Sundanese rulers tried to apply this level of language as a marker of power relations, reflecting the principle that "the powerless should be polite to the stronger." This psychological domination was then applied to the life of Priyangan by modifying the old Sundanese to have the same usage as Solo



or Yogya Javanese. Even then, Cianjur had royals who could effectively absorb the style and character of the Mataram Javanese. In this matter, it became known as the area with the most refined Sundanese users after successfully acquiring the linguistic adoption in the Priangan region. However, in the last years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the egalitarian old Sundanese began to disappear. Then, in 1872, the Dutch colonial government standardized this language etiquette as the chosen standard language in the West Java Prefecture, which was enforced within the government and the local elites (Lubis, 1998: 216-218) (Hidayat et al., 2020: 13-14).

There seem to be similarities between Brebes Sundanese and Banten Sundanese in terms of the absence of *undak-usuk* or language levels. There have been no comparative studies comparing the two varieties of Sundanese. The Sundanese-speaking population of the sub-district has lived in the area for a long time because some parts of Brebes used to be the territory of the Kingdom of Galuh and the Kingdom of Padjadjaran. According to the ancient manuscript Bujangga Manik, the boundaries of the Sundanese kingdom to the east are the Brebes River or Pemali River and the Serayu River 19. The absence of language levels, as in Priangan Sundanese, indicates that Brebes Sundanese was not affected by Mataram domination in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Brebes Sundanese dialect still maintains its egalitarian nature and equality. Speakers of Brebes Sundanese are indigenous people who are scattered and form pockets of Brebes Sundanese, especially in the districts of Banjarharjo, Bantarkawung, Ketanggungan, Larangan, Losari, Salem, and Tanjung (Suyanto, 2018: 207).

The villager residents use their language in most linguistic domains, in the family, friends, neighbors, and Sundanese-speaking visitors with no language level. In the occupation and community domain, they consistently use the language, while the school children use it only with their fellow villagers residents and tended to use Indonesian to address teachers. The use of the dialect was clearly seen during both, their main religious ceremony Ngasa and common rituals, such as *Tundan* (the ritual to ward off mouse pests), *Tutulak* (the ritual to ward off misfortunes), and *Ngaguyang Kuwu* (The ritual to call the rain).

- **Preserving Brebes Sundanese Dialect**

Language, along with symbols, norms, values, and artifacts, is an essential part of culture as it becomes a vital component of cultural identity and heritage. Social groups need to maintain their heritage language to help them connect with their cultural roots and preserve their cultural traditions. This effort is essential for maintaining a sense of belonging and community (Aprianto, 2016:35-36; Vallance, 2015:3).

According to Ki Dastam, the *pemangku adat*, Sundanese is the identity carried by the residents of Jalawastu Traditional Village, as proven by the use of Brebes Sundanese as a daily language of instruction, as it is also confirmed by Daryono. Both Dastam and Daryono call themselves *urang sunda* (Sundanese) but use a different kind of Sundanese in Bandung. According to Rizal (35 years), the Sundanese, and the Jalawastu people maintain a language awareness that Brebes

Sundanese outside the village might see that the Jalawastu people are impolite because Brebes Sundanese dialect has no language levels. Rizal mentioned that "Brebes Sundanese is different from Bandung's Sundanese. We do not use language level here. Therefore, whenever talking to those who use West Java's Sundanese, we are afraid they might think we are rude."

Rizal realizes some differences exist between the Brebes Sundanese dialect and the Priangan Sundanese dialect, which is known to utilize three language levels (*lemes*, *loma*, and rough style) in verbal encounters. He uses the term Bandung's Sundanese, which probably refers to Priangan dialect commonly spoken in Bandung, the capital of West Java, which may be the center of Sundanese culture. Likewise, the Lelea people in the Indramayu area call the Javanese *wong wetan* (the easterners – due to the location of the Javanese-speaking area) and the Sundanese *wong gunung* (the mountain people) despite their genealogical connection (Mascita et al., 2021:187). This finding indicates that the people of Jalawastu and the people of Lelea view language as part of their constructing identity, which is different from others, even though there is a relationship or historical connection between the two. Language is not merely seen as a means of communication, but also as a property to characterize themselves and show in-group solidarity in the community and when they are out of the area.

Based on field observations on oral interaction, it was found that Brebes Sundanese in the Jalawastu community is used daily in the domains of family, friendship, religion, group and community, and work. In the family domain, Brebes Sundanese is used predominantly in the home environment. In friendship or social relations, the residents also use it and make it a kind of identity as a member of the Jalawastu speech group or a mark of in-group solidarity. It is also the language of instruction in religious matters, which include religious activities such as recitation and life cycle ceremonies (birth, marriage, and death) as well as traditional ceremonies such as the Ngasa Ceremony in which the prayers are performed in Sundanese (Mascita et al., 2021) (Fadlillah & Supriyanto, 2020) and (Mubarok et al., 2020). Besides the Ngasa festival, the people also occasionally hold traditional rituals such as *Tundan*, *Tutulak*, and *Ngaguyang Kuwu*, all of which are performed in Brebes Sundanese dialect (Pratama et al., 2023) and (Pramudya et al., 2022). The annual Ngasa festival becomes the distinctive identity of the Jalawastu people. The festival is held only by this community, and it becomes the event to thank *Sang Hyang Tunggal* or God for the blessings, protection, and prosperity given to them and also as a form of deference to Guriang Panutus, their ancestor (see also Haryanto, 2022; Adawiyah, 2022; Permata & Birsyada, 2022; Sidiq et al., 2023; Mubarok, 2019; Rokhman, 2020; Muhaemin et al., 2021; and Asrawijaya 2022). This may mark their construction of social identity as the Jalawastu community. The dialect is also used in community activities, such as village meetings. Its use is also extended to the work domain when, for instance, work relationships, such as commerce and cultivation of fields, involve fellow Brebes Sundanese speakers. The vitality of Brebes Sundanese is maintained because the speakers live in groups and are concentrated in one village and have language loyalty, especially those driven by

their belief in their identity as descendants of Guriang Panutus who passed down Sundanese and adherence to religious beliefs to obey the myths and taboos determined by the ancestors. According to Wusto Widodo (38), the village chief, those who wish to obey no longer the belief usually decide to move out of the community.

In contrast to Azmi's finding (2019) on language maintenance in Sundanese speakers in a Javanese-speaking environment, which shows that Sundanese speakers will tend to use Sundanese when meeting fellow speakers of the language, Brebes Sundanese dialect users see a difference in the dialect they use with the Priyangan Sundanese dialect which has more speakers in West Java. However, rough Sundanese seems to indicate egalitarianism and strengthen the solidarity of Brebes Sundanese users with a much smaller and remote speech community. The dialect use was seen as the construction of identity by the Jalawastu people, who strongly believed that they must preserve their cultural traditions and rituals as a part of who they are because the practices carry the collective memory and history of their community. Their mother tongue, the Brebes Sundanese dialect, is seen as a cultural marker of identity. As Abdelhadi (2017:113) argues, maintaining community languages has a significant relationship with constructing and retaining one's identity. The Jalawastu community preserves their social belief that they are Sundanese who live in the Javanese land and want to keep using the language as a mark of their identity.

- **The Barrier to the Maintenance of Brebes Sundanese Dialect**

Language maintenance helps to preserve the diverse, unique cultural elements. This action also ensures that cultural traditions, knowledge, and ways of life are safeguarded for future generations. Maintaining language ensures that valuable wisdom and knowledge are passed down from one generation to another in a community in order to foster continuity and cultural sustainability. One of the crucial language preservation efforts is formally teaching a language in educational institutions. This attempt is due to the essential element of language inheritance as part of culture. Wurm (2003:16) states that the loss or death of a language starts with children, continues to adolescent speakers, then middle-aged speakers, and elderly speakers, until finally, there are only a few very old speakers who will bring their language to death when they are gone. He argues that when the young speakers of a language switch to another language, the language is beginning to be threatened; when the speakers are middle-aged, the language is already severely threatened; and when there are only elderly speakers left, the language will already be dead or lost. One of the crucial efforts to preserve the language is teaching the language in school, especially to young learners, who are the successors of the language being taught.

Among the factors supporting language preservation, one obstacle arose in education. After enacting the regional autonomy policy through Law No. 22/1999, many regions made rules and regulations to construct their regional identity. This effort is also the case in Central Java Province which launched three regional regulations regarding regional languages, namely (1) Regional Regulation of Central Java Province Number 9 of 2012 concerning Javanese

Language, Literature, and Script, (2) Central Java Governor Regulation Number 57 of 2013 concerning Implementation Guidelines for Regional Regulation of Central Java Province Number 9 of 2012 concerning Javanese Language, Literature, and Script, and (3) Central Java Governor Regulation Number 55 of 2014 concerning Amendments to Central Java Governor Regulation Number 57 of 2013 concerning Implementation Guidelines for Regional Regulation of Central Java Province Number 9 of 2012 concerning Javanese Language, Literature, and Script. All three outline the obligation to teach Javanese.

The Sundanese people in Central Java province are one of the ethnic minorities which has 323,207 people or 1.05% of the total population of Central Java province, based on the 2010 census (Suryadinata et al., 2003:20), and they are not migrants from the land of Sunda or West Java, but rather indigenous people who for generations have lived in Brebes and Cilacap districts. The enactment of the three regional regulations led to the cessation of Sundanese language teaching according to the 2013 Curriculum, and in 2014, schools had to administer the midterm exam in Javanese even though Sundanese was taught. Imelda (2022) criticized the Central Java Provincial Language Regulation as an act that mistreats the minority Sundanese language users because the government imposes a majority Javanese identity and does not recognize the Sundanese identity of the minority Sundanese speakers. Ki Dastam, who happens to be an educator at a public school, also expressed a similar view. When the regulations were implemented, he recalled that the Sundanese teachers and their students were shocked, as he stated: "The students were being taught Sundanese when suddenly, at the end of the term, the final exam was Javanese subject. It was both shocking and disappointing. We felt that the government ignored our existence, the Sundanese-speaking community as the minority."

Eventually, the newly-appointed Regent of Brebes, Idza Priyanti, came to the rescue by issuing Brebes Regent Regulation No. 7 of 2021 concerning the guidelines for The Implementation of Sundanese Language Local Content, signed on 8 November 2021. This Regent Regulation (*Perbup*) regulates and authorizes the teaching of Sundanese as local content in eight sub-districts in Brebes Regency, namely Losari, Tanjung, Kersana, Banjarharjo, Ketanggungan, Larangan, Salem, and Bantarkawung sub-districts covering elementary and junior high school levels comprising 230 elementary schools and 36 junior high schools or a total of 266 schools. With this regional policy, the effort to preserve Brebes Sundanese is expected to continue because language teaching through formal schools is fundamental, as well as the government's efforts to protect, maintain, and promote Indonesian as the national language and the state's official language. Both languages have similar functions: as a means of communication and a symbol of their speakers' identity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The study shows that the people of Jalawastu realized that their language is a tool for passing down not only cultural traditions but also their shared social identity to their younger generations. The Brebes Sundanese dialect is crucial to the lives of the indigenous community as it is the language of daily

communication in their social domains (family, friendship, social group, community, and occupation), the essential element of their rituals and religious affairs, and the adherence to the shared belief that they were obliged to preserve their language which their ancestors passed. The use of the language also indicated the existence of in-group solidarity among the community members and the showcase of their social identity.

The community realized that their dialect might be considered rude when they had to communicate with non-community Sundanese speakers as their dialect had no polite style to converse in the mutually intelligible Sundanese. In the long term, this language awareness might reduce the number of users of this indigenous dialect, as those who can speak Indonesian prefer to use the national language rather than the dialect to avoid misunderstanding or embarrassment. A constraint in their effort to conserve the language arose when the provincial government wanted to impose a cultural policy that ignored their identity as a Sundanese-speaking minority. However, finally, the district government came to the rescue by issuing a policy that allowed the teaching of Sundanese as local content. It will be an interesting challenge to measure the sustainability of the dialect because of its location in Javanese-speaking areas. Further research may be required to see if it could survive the threat of language loss due to the spread of Indonesian, which may replace traditional languages nationwide.

#### **Conflicts of Interest:**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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