Fig. 9. KUPANG: Late at night, residents congregate at the edge of the main street near the mouth of their kampung. From this vantage they can sip tea, exchange jibes, and both monitor the comings and goings of their fellows while mingling themselves.
August 2009: photo by S. Chris Brown
IN SEARCH OF MIDDLE INDONESIAN: LINGUISTIC DYNAMICS IN A PROVINCIAL TOWN

Joseph Errington

Middle Indonesian cities like Kupang, capital of the province of East Nusa Tenggara, present a kind of linguistic puzzle.¹ There, as elsewhere in Indonesia, the Indonesian language (bahasa Indonesia) has uncontested primacy within a far-reaching network of state institutions, a rapidly developing political economy, the mass media and an urban consumerist culture. In these and other ways Indonesian serves and symbolizes the integrationist dynamic that has driven Kupang’s growth from the time it became a provincial capital in the late 1950s up to the present. Its present population of about 350,000 testifies to Kupang’s attractive power for members of the province’s many ethnic groups, particularly younger people who see it as a point of access, through new avenues of geographic and social mobility, into a burgeoning Indonesian middle class. Yet fluent, standard Indonesian is not much heard in Kupang.

Even educated, middle-class people there commonly converse about sophisticated matters and in formal situations in a local dialect of Malay known as ba(ha)sa Kupang (‘Kupang language’ or ‘Kupangese’) or bahasa Melayu Kupang, ‘Kupang Malay’. Structural similarities between Indonesian and Kupang Malay allow them to be classified as dialects of a single language, but they are sufficiently different so that Kupang Malay is far from fully intelligible to anyone who knows only standard Indonesian. So, after two generations of modernization have made the national language increasingly important throughout the country, including Middle Indonesian cities like Kupang, Indonesian’s inroads into everyday urban life seem surprisingly shallow. Kupang Malay continues to be spoken as the distinctly native language of 220,000 people in the city and its

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