

Southeast Sulawesi Tribe Using Korean Alphabet to Preserve Native Tongue

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A small Indonesian ethnic group with no written version of its language has decided to adopt the Korean alphabet known as Hangeul, a scholar involved in the project said on Thursday.

It is the first case of Hangeul, a phonetic alphabet, being used by a foreign society, said Seoul National University professor Lee Ho-Young.

Lee said that the Cia-Cia ethnic group in the southern part of Buton Island in Southeast Sulawesi, including in the city of Bau-Bau, had adopted the script to transcribe its aboriginal Austronesian language.

Their language is also known as Cia-Cia and is closely related to the Wolio language prevalent in Southeast Sulawesi.

Ancient Cia-Cia literature exists in the Gundul script, a form of Arabic with five additional letters and no signs to denote vocals that was used in the old Malay world.

Lee said that the city on July 21 began teaching students the alphabet based on textbooks created by the Hunminjeongeum Research Institute, a linguistic society in Seoul.

"The Cia-Cia are now able to preserve their native language," said Lee, an institute member who played a key role in creating the textbooks, describing the case as "historic."

The books explain the history and culture of the ethnic group, which numbers about 60,000. "I hope this will be a stepping stone for the spread of Hangeul abroad," Lee said.

The decision "reflects our efforts for years to spread Hangeul abroad," he said. "The tribe also wanted to promote economic and cultural exchanges with our country."

The institute has promised to start work in November on a cultural center for the ethnic group, to train language teachers and to support cultural exchanges.

It has been trying for years to spread the Korean alphabet to minority tribes across Asia who lack their own writing system.

The institute was quoted by The Korea Times on Thursday as saying that the Cia-Cia had been "on the verge of losing its language, due to a lack of tool to hand it down to its descendants."

According to the institute, since last month, dozens of children in the tribe have learned how to write, read and pronounce the Korean alphabet based on a textbook provided by the institute. Another 140 high school students in the city have recently followed suit, it added.

Agence France-Presse