

Initial Assessment on the Language Vitality of Binadjao Iligan

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: March 04, 2021

Accepted: April 22, 2021

Volume: 4

Issue: 4

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2021.4.4.16

KEYWORDS

Language assesswadesh List,
Binadjao Iligan, Sinama, Binisaya
Iligan, morphological identicalness

ABSTRACT

The study is a brief assessment of the language and culture of an internally displaced group of people called the Badjaos. Specifically, it attempted to survey their spoken vitality, identity, and literacy and identify their hopes and aspirations. Rapid ethnographic techniques and fieldwork were conducted with the assistance of key informants, validators, and consultants. Results of the study pointed to the limited opportunities and settings where the Badjao language is used, which further deprive them of economic chances. However, language is vital to personal and social expressions. In terms of identity, the group admits to experiencing discrimination. The availability of literacy materials in their language is uncommon. Thus, their aspiration is to be included in the government's education programs for an eventual increase in literacy in their community.

1. Introduction

As people move, their languages move with them. Similarly situated, in the 1970s, the Badjaos of Sulu Archipelago, that belonged to the larger *Sama Dilaut* ethnic grouping (Bracamonte, 2011), were dispersed from their homeland due to local military conflicts (Daug et al., 2013); thus, they migrated to other areas in the Philippines for better living conditions. According to Cummins (2000), the mobility of a group of people could threaten the vitality of their language and culture. They are often confronted with the need to accommodate or assimilate with the more dominant members of the community, where they, without given any choice, have to habituate. Such displaced people require support. In the Philippine context, multilingual education was adopted in 2012 to promote linguistic inclusivity; however, how does such translate to the hopes and aspirations of the Badjaos? Do the Badjaos in Iligan see themselves still rooted in their language and culture?

In this study, fieldwork was necessary to gather first-hand information on the current status and plight of the Badjaos, who were on refugee status in Iligan City since the late 1990s. The researcher conducted a brief language assessment to determine the language vitality of Binadjao Iligan. Further, data from the interviews with key informants were used to reveal the hopes and aspirations of the respondents.

This research specifically endeavored to shed light on the following research questions:

1. Based on the Language Assessment Charts, what is the status of Binadjao Iligan, in terms of its:
 - a. Spoken vitality,
 - b. Identity, and
 - c. Literacy/Reading and Writing?
2. What are the hopes and aspirations of the Badjaos in Iligan?

Even the displaced peoples have the inherent rights to retain their dignity (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2007). They deserve to be informed about the status of their language (and culture), so they can decide on its future. The Sustainable Use Model (SUM) by Lewis and Simons (2015) was adopted in this study. The guide was based on major training workshops conducted by the Summer Institute for Linguistics (SIL), which the researcher personally attended in 2016 (Davao and Baguio Cities). In these

training workshops, the Lewis and Simon's Sustainable Language Use: Perspectives on Community-based Language Development guidelines were emphasized to in order to facilitate the linguistic empowerment of linguistically minoritized communities.

2. Literature Review

It is commonly known that it is through education one can derive knowledge to advance the self and communities. Each adult has the responsibility to relay life-saving knowledge to children to perpetuate the survival (or remembrance) of a language and culture, in the form of a continuous legacy to perpetuity. Many would agree that culture embodies the essence of our humanness which needs to be preserved since it relates to our identity as a person or as a people, and thus, answers important questions about life and the purpose of existence in this world. Thus, every human being deserves the right to know his culture, and with that, to cultivate and to promote it as well. In fact, the UN declares the rights of indigenous peoples (ILO, 2009). The declaration is a reminder that all nations, foremost to other provisions, "shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities".

Literacy in a language (or multiple languages when the circumstance demands it) is pivotal in the evolution of any society. Edwards (2009) cited a need to preserve and develop one's first language, especially in a context where there is a persistent threat to its demise. Such threats can be social, economic or political. Whether we like it or not, we have to make some choices. Some decisions often lead minoritized peoples to surrender their linguistic rights over to a more dominant culture or group, especially when our heritage language loses its functions or prestige in society and that, it no longer empowers them to access basic socio-economic resources. In such a case, the right to learn and be literate in one's own language is relinquished to outsiders. To some, this act may be considered a form of cowardice. Others may think of it as a complicated, inevitable move towards self-preservation. The latter is a paradox showing that as one shift towards a more dominant language (and culture), that is, by losing one's identity, he/she lets the slow-painful-yet-rewarding metamorphosis for repositioning and regaining a lost pride. However, no matter what perspective is taken on this matter, the advocacy should be about making everyone understand the cause and be literate enough to restore pride in his/her own language and cultural identity to have the desire to keep and perpetuate the legacy for future generations.

In relation, according to Kosonen (2015), learners who are taught in their mother tongue have a healthier world view than others who are taught in a foreign language that they do not fully understand. He further added that national educative policies tend to exclude the minorities, thus putting them in a predicament where they are "generally disadvantaged in education participation and achievement" which by implication could be the unquenchable furnaces behind social maladies and inequalities.

3. Methodology

The study involved a brief language vitality assessment of Binadjao Iligan, which is a dominant language spoken among the Badjaos in Iligan City, who were displaced from their homes in Jolo, Tawi-tawi, and Basilan by local armed conflicts in the 1970s. According to a community elder, their historic arrival to Iligan was recorded to have happened in 1996, who also served as key respondent and informant. Thus, the refugee settlement in Iligan started in the late 1990s.

The settlement started with only about 20 stilt houses built at the shores of Barangay Tambacan, near the left side river delta of Barangay Poblacion. As of this time, there are already more than a hundred houses, comprising a total of about 300 residents. The eldest in the community is about 80 years old, who was part of the pioneering group who sought refuge in Iligan in the late 1990s. The determination of age among the Badjaos is done by estimation only since they do not adopt the calendar system.

Based on the gathered data during the initial interviews, according to the key informant, the ethnography of the Badjaos in Iligan in terms of cohabitation begins when a female reaches adolescence of about 10 to 12 years old or when menstruation happens. Particularly, after the second menstruation, parents may decide to give a female Badjao child away to marriage. In terms of the number of husbands or wives, a Badjao can take as many as three or four; thus, they observe multiple cohabitations, which may not necessarily happen simultaneously since marriages may be dissolved when disagreements arise between couples, so they can remarry. As recorded in the community, a female can give birth to as many as 15 children, which may often be due to multiple partners. When asked about the suspected prevalence of incestuous affairs, the key informants refused to answer (the researcher politely asked if they would like to comment on the alleged incestuous sexual involvements among the Badjaos was common knowledge in the community but was considered taboo).

This study employed modified rapid ethnographic studies techniques, which involved community observation and interviews with key informants. The actual field visitations happened four times. Follow-up interviews to patch the information gaps were

conducted via phone calls and FaceBook Messaging with the contact persons since fieldwork was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and with the observance of health and safety protocols.

4. Findings and Discussion

Based on the Language Assessment Charts, which has been adopted from the Sustainable Use Model (SUM) by Lewis and Simons (2015), the following is the status of Binadjao Iligan:

Table 1. Spoken Vitality	KI Response
Where do we speak our language?	Few settings
When do we speak only our language?	Few situations
How many of us think there is a benefit to speaking our language?	Some people
Are children learning to speak our language?	Some children
Do policies support us speaking our language?	Little support
How do these policies affect us speaking of our language?	Neutral

Based on the responses by the Key Informants, as shown in Table 1 above, it was revealed that the Badjaos in Iligan perceive that they have very limited settings where they can use their language, apart from speaking their language within their community among themselves, they do not know of any other domains where the Binadjao language is spoken. In fact, when they take the streets to beg for alms, they somehow have to shift to speaking in Bisaya. Begging is a significant economic activity among many Badjaos in Iligan. Since many of them did not have the opportunity to access education, they have very limited economic opportunities. Almost all business establishments do not employ them for jobs for some reasons. Similarly, they also have limited situations when they could speak their language aside from within their community since most outsiders are not conversant or interested in knowing their language.

Recently, a foreign religious group noticed the Badjaos and extended to a selected number of children scholarship to attend basic education. Their type of education, according to an informant, is inclusive education. Though, multilingual education is the prescribed curriculum. Since the teachers are not familiar with Binadjao and there are no available learning materials, the Badjao children, about 15 of them, who were schooled in the local public and private elementary schools in Iligan, are compelled to speak in Binisaya (some others attempt to speak in Filipino or Tagalog but are not able to sustain communication in most instances), limiting factors defeat the goals of MLE. In school, the Badjao learners speak Binadjao among themselves, but many are already highly proficient in Bisaya (spoken form), so they feel more comfortable socializing in Bisaya when they are among other non-Badjao children or when speaking with their teachers.

While the UNICEF and UNESCO and the Philippine Department of Education, including all the language scientists who work on multilingual education, acknowledge and support the use of the mother-tongue in basic education, the Badjaos think that since many of them have not proficiently acquired any other languages due to limited opportunities and access to education, they still believe that knowing their own language has benefits especially in the area of interpersonal communication.

Further, according to the key informant, since a few of their children have already started joining mainstream education and have proficiently learned the dominant social language, which is Bisaya, many other children in their communities have started seeing the value of learning Bisaya, especially when they are out in the streets and have to deal with non-Badjaos. Thus, clearly the situation shows a shift in language due to hegemonic influences.

According to a teacher respondent who teaches in the local elementary schools where a few Badjao children go to school, the MLE policies are usually not observed in schools where there are no learning materials, nor teachers who are speakers of a minority language, available. So, while they appreciate learning in their own language, many of them just do not have the options available in schools as of this time. They feel a neutral feeling since being given a chance to be educated together with the other non-Badjao children is already a blessing. According to the teacher respondent, a few of her Badjao pupils excel in class, which is very inspirational.

Expressions of Self Introduction in Binadjao Iligan

English Translation	Binadjao Iligan
I am Ronnie Asani.	<i>Aku si Ronnie Asani.</i>
I am forty seven years old.	<i>Aku undi pitu upatkawalu.</i>
I live in Purok 4 Tambacan.	<i>Aniya 'ku Purok 4 Tambacan.</i>

The elder of the Badjao community, who at the same time was a key informant and respondent, was asked to translate basic expressions in the Binadjao language. He introduced himself using his language, as shown above. Overall, based on the presented data, it can be surmised that there is high vitality of the spoken Binadjao language, especially within the Badjao community; however, it has very low in domains outside of the community vitality.

Table 2. Identity	KI Response
When do we use phrases or words in our language?	Many situations
When do we use phrases or words ONLY in our language?	Many situations
How many of us think that there is a benefit in knowing phrases or words in our language?	Many people
Are any of the next generation learning phrases or words of our language?	Many of them
Do policies support us maintaining our identity?	Little support
How do these policies affect our identity as an ethnic group?	Neutral

As shown on Table 2 above, the key informant identified many situations when they could use the Binadjao language, however, these situations are limited within their community. Many of them consider their language beneficial, but in situations when they have to interact with others outside of their immediate community, they had to shift linguistic identities to the more dominant language, Bisaya. Although the Badjaos of Iligan have not been observed to be religious, yet perhaps because of external influences, whenever they ply the streets for alms, many have learned the expression, “daghan pa imung kinabuhi” (translated as, may you have many lives) which could be a similar expression of gratefulness for the received blessings. The expression may structurally stated as “unta motaas pa imung kinabuhi” (translated as, may you be blessed with a long life). Assumingly, such expression is already a culturally borrowed, and thus, not part of the Badjao identity. According to the informant, many young people still use Badjao words and phrases; however, over the years, their linguistic expressions have started to accommodate common expressions from external influences.

Meanwhile, despite the government’s many cultural agencies and programs, whether local or national, the informant replied that policies that could address the maintenance of their identities do not cascade to their community. In fact, the informant divulged his hurt about the racial discrimination many of them face when they are in public. He, however, is grateful that due to his connections with some influential local politicians and neighbours, they were included in the government’s 4P’s program. While in the past there had been agencies that helped them, such were not sustainable; that is why many of them still go back to the streets to beg, because it is the only source of livelihood they know.

Table 3. Reading and Writing	KI Response
What do we read and write in our language?	Nothing
When do we read and write in our language?	No situations
How many of us think that there is benefit to reading and writing in our language?	Some people
Are young people learning to read and write in our language?	None of the young
Do policies support us reading and writing our language?	Little support
How do these policies affect us reading and writing in our language?	Neutral

In terms of literacy (Reading and Writing), the informant reported that there are little to no reading materials available in their language, as far as he knows. Thus, there are also no or very limited situations which require them to read or write. As of this year, there are about 15 scholars, sponsored by a foreign religious group, which were sent to pursue basic education in selected public and private schools in Iligan. Without the scholarship, he doubted anyone among his people would go to school because many of them live on a daily subsistence. Others are also too old to go to school. Some others, especially the females, have babies and families to care about. Though, generally, he believed that education is important.

On matters related to the hopes and aspirations of the Badjaos of Iligan, according to the key informant who also serves as one of the leaders of his community, already he has been starting to see economic changes among his people. The outside supports from the government and the local and foreign groups have slightly alleviated their living conditions. Although many of them still rely on mendicancy, the supports they get from certain institutions have made an impact on some of them. Already they see how the education of some of their children has slowly integrated them into the larger local community. He believed that racial discrimination follows them wherever they go, but if later there would be professionals among the Badjaos, then the impressions of others about them would likewise change.

5. Conclusion

The study was an assessment of the language of a community of internally displaced Badjaos in terms of its spoken vitality, identity and literacy. It also attempted to describe its retained culture to identify its hopes and inspirations. Based on the results as provided by the key informants, Binadjao Iligan as a spoken language is significantly vital, especially within the community. It enables them to maintain a distinct identity, albeit the prevalent social discrimination. Unfortunately, the language is not formally identified nor supported for literacy purposes despite the Mothertongue-based language policy, thus keeping many of the Badjaos unable to read or write.

The Badjaos of Iligan hope to recognise their language by the educational system, and thus, they aspire to improve their literacy levels and general socio-economic situations. Such aspiration may not necessarily be common among all Badjao refugees all over the country. As a recommendation, other researchers may conduct a similar assessment in other Badjao refugee communities in the country. A comparison of results can provide a more detailed description of the status of Binadjao, which can be a basis for its inclusion in the formal or even informal language learning curricula.

Acknowledgment

Special thanks and acknowledgment is due to the Badjao Community in Tambacan, Iligan City, and to the following persons for their assistance to the completion of this research:

Danilo Yosores, 32 years old, Translator/Validator. Tambacan, Iligan City
 Jeany Vieve S. Barulan, 43 years old, Guide/Outside informant. Iligan City
 Memet Yosores Cadungo, 37 years old, Translator. Tambacan, Iligan City
 Kate Schell, Literacy & Education Specialist/Consultant. LEAD Asia-Pacific and SIL International.
 Ronnie Asani, 48 years old, Key Informant. Tambacan, Iligan City
 Rynj Gonzales. SIL Coordinator/Consultant.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. This study is limited only to the information gathered from the Badjao community in Iligan City. Other Badjao communities may experience different situations and realities.

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